

Social Sustainability Research Theme

Final Paper
(Part 1 - Summary)

prepared by

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank all the organisations which freely gave their time for this research project. In particular, we should like to thank Richard Mellish, Sustainable Development Unit, DETR; David Aeron-Thomas, UK Head of Social Audit and Reporting At KPMG; David Shirley, Environmental Director Of Sustainability Advisory Services, KPMG; Paul Monaghan, Ecology Unit of the Co-Operative Bank; Jason Perks, Consultant for Vauxhall; and James Farrar, Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Business Unit, British Airways.



Executive Summary

This research theme considers the adequacy of available tools, techniques, guides, principles and standards for the management of social sustainability.

This report, as part of the SIGMA project, presents a systematic analysis of the range of standards, guidelines and other approaches in use whose scope covers aspects of social sustainability. The results and analysis of this research serves to contribute to the development of guidelines for sustainability management.

The research selected for analysis fourteen standards, guidelines and other approaches. Telephone interviews were conducted with selected organisations drawn from the SIGMA partners. Two workshops were also arranged for both SIGMA and other project stakeholders to review the social sustainability research and its relationship to the SIGMA guidelines.

The findings of the research fall into two categories; those relating to characteristics of the standards themselves, and a second group which are needs for guidance arising out of how the different approaches are put to use. In the first category, the main findings were:

- ∑ In all standards and approaches - except AA1000 - the quality of stakeholder dialogue was peripheral.
- ∑ The more focused standards and approaches were likely to include specifications for a management system.
- ∑ Those approaches with a broad scope tend to include less detail on operational management, which are essential to implement the requirements of the approach.
- ∑ Although many of the standards and approaches overlap with each other for coverage, there is little cross-referencing between them.
- ∑ Staff, as a stakeholder group, receive the most extensive coverage.
- ∑ There were two gaps identified in the coverage of most standards and approaches; the economic aspects of sustainability, and the performance of organisations towards their suppliers.
- ∑ The profusion of standards and approaches inhibits, rather than encourages organisations to adopt new standards.

The second group of findings illustrates a need for guidance on the following:

- ∑ stakeholder dialogue;
- ∑ understanding the extent to which adherence to existing standards and approaches is necessary for achieving sustainability;
- ∑ the integration of existing work with standards and other approaches;
- ∑ a business case for working with all aspects of sustainability;
- ∑ defining the boundary of responsibility of an organisation.

The conclusions and recommendations for the SIGMA project include the following:

- ∑ Inclusion of detailed specifications within the SIGMA Guidelines for stakeholder dialogue and accountability.
- ∑ Covering the gaps among the existing set of standards and approaches for stakeholder and issue coverage.
- ∑ Ensuring that the existing footprint of existing standards and approaches is clear concerning the requirements of sustainability.

The report concludes by describing some ideas for potential tools suggested during the research, which could become part of the SIGMA Toolkit, and additional areas of research which could benefit the SIGMA project.

The report of this research is in two documents; a summary, which is presented in this document (Part 1) and a set of case studies (Part 2).

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1.0

Introduction



1.0.1

1.1

Background

The SIGMA project has delivered a Phase 1 Report that has identified, in the social sustainability area that:

- ∑ there is a large number of standards which provide different management system elements, however many look only at a particular aspect of social sustainability, such as values, health and safety, labour standards and information security;
- ∑ there is a range of standards and guidelines in the social field that are sector specific.

The purpose of Phase 2, of which this research is a part, is to develop sustainability management system guidelines following a systematic analysis of the range of standards and guidelines in use.

This social sustainability research theme is intended to set out how that might be done. The fundamental research question is "how far are the available tools, techniques and standards adequate for the management of social sustainability?" This paper also draws out the implications for the SIGMA Project.

This paper is the Final Paper produced by the social sustainability research theme. It reports on the desk research and interviews with SIGMA's organisational partners. The original Research Plan is included as Appendix A.

The paper is structured into four sections, including this introduction:

- ∑ Background, Definitions and Concepts: which defines the basic terms used within the paper, including the concept of social sustainability.
- ∑ Approach: setting out key definitions and outlining how the research was conducted and the way in which each standard was analysed.
- ∑ Findings and analysis: setting out the findings of the research.
- ∑ Issues and Recommendations: suggesting how SIGMA could learn from the findings.

In addition, six Appendices present the detailed findings.

1.1

Definitions and Concepts

Three concepts have underlined this research:

- Σ standard, together with the related concepts of principles, approaches, guidelines and code;
- Σ process and substantive;
- Σ social sustainability.

Standards

A 'standard' is a written document that seeks to influence behaviour so that it is recognisable and reproducible. Within the field of standards for social sustainability, the purpose of this is often to improve some aspect of the social performance of the organisations applying the standard.

In many ways the word standard is used loosely. There are two broad types of 'standard': informal guidelines or statements of principle and formal standards that are systematically articulated and supported by well-developed organisational structures. Outside the world of formal standards development, for which the ISO process is the paradigm, there is no accepted definition of the concept of standard. In the area of social 'standards', in particular, the idea of commonly accepted ways of working includes 'guides', 'codes' and 'principles'. The latter tend to be more aspirational than prescriptive. Our analysis has included both formal standards together with other initiatives that seek to set out how organisations should manage their social impact.

Process vs Substantive

Some clarification is necessary for the distinction between the 'process' and the 'substantive' aspects of standards. At its simplest level, a substantive element of a standard is one that directly captures an impact or achievement, and a process element is one that describes how something is managed. A substantive environmental indicator, for example, could be the 'tonnes of CO₂' emitted by an organisation. A corresponding process indicator might be the existence (or otherwise) of a management system to control the emission of CO₂.

However, this distinction is rarely so clear-cut in practice, particularly where social standards are concerned. The first issue concerns the level of detail at which an element is defined. If the substantive indicator 'tonnes of CO₂' is replaced by a more abstract indicator, such as 'greenhouse gases', then process questions appear such as: how are greenhouse gases measured? The same is true for social elements. It appears that indicators and standards have fractal properties, in that, for almost any level of detail, it is possible to define both substantive (the 'what') and process (the 'how') aspects for a given element.

1.1.2

1.1

However, social elements have an additional layer of complexity. For example, process elements, particularly about accountability, are perceived as elements of substantive performance in their own right. In other words, if stakeholders care about an organisation's performance, it matters to stakeholders how accountable those organisations are for that aspect of its performance. This again means, and in a different way, that the same element may be considered to be both substantive and process at the same time. For example, the level of pay for staff can be seen as a substantive matter. The manner in which organisations carry out processes such as setting pay levels, for example, also matters because this issue can be a source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The distinction between 'process' and 'substantive' is therefore complex, but it is also central to the structure of a standard to address social aspects of sustainability. The analysis of the standards below has made necessarily crude judgements as to the degree to which a particular standard includes substantive or process elements.

Social Sustainability

'Social sustainability' has no currently accepted definition. There are (at least) three possible approaches to defining it:

- ∑ by means of substantive achievement. This approach underlies the aims of perhaps the more radical campaigning NGOs. Following this approach, a definition of social sustainability would include a prescription, amongst many other parameters, for each society, of:
 - a. rates of employee pay;
 - b. appropriate terms and conditions for paying suppliers;
 - c. acceptable levels of profit for shareholders;
 - d. levels of product return and customer satisfaction;
 - e. the place which experimentation on animals should have in the development of medical products;
- ∑ by delineation of the key issues of stakeholder concern. This approach has been followed by standards such as the GRI and, it could be argued, by the UN and ILO. Following this approach, a definition of sustainability would encompass both a listing of the minimum issues which must be adequately addressed and, possibly, suggestions as to the substantive achievement, in respect of the issues, which is regarded as acceptable;
- ∑ by a specification of the nature of the process which can lead to sustainability. This approach has been followed by The Natural Step in relation to environmental sustainability. Following this approach, sustainability could be recognised by means of the processes through which the system of relationships within the society operated. In relation to organisations, it would concern the way in which organisations related to their stakeholders.

1.1

The virtue of the first approach, defining social sustainability in terms of substantive achievement, is the certainty which would be available. However, such certainty depends on consensus over what substantive achievements are acceptable and would require describing in detail what the world and human society would have to look like in social terms. This is extremely challenging. Appropriate levels of achievement are highly contentious issues, and ones that have been central points of conflict throughout human history. Accordingly, this paper will not attempt to make use of such a definition, and would not be straightforward for SIGMA.

The virtue of the second approach, based on key issues of stakeholder concern, is that the areas of major concern can be defined, without presuming too much. The difficulties with this approach are that:

- ∑ the definition of the substantive areas of achievement remaining may still be contentious. Some of the SIGMA partners consulted during this research, pointed out that the ILO Conventions on free association, for example, were not universally accepted;
- ∑ it is not clear that the issues identified are globally acceptable. In a world which is increasingly characterised by globalisation, it is paradoxically increasingly likely that there will be disagreements based on the relative importance of new social issues.

While such a definition of social sustainability is helpful, and may be used as a practicable starting point for organisations wishing to find a workable benchmark, it is not robust as a definition of social sustainability. Nevertheless, a succinct analysis of the content of the UN and ILO Conventions could be a useful tool for SIGMA to develop, and would capture some of the benefits of the first approach.

Sustainability in terms of processes

The definition of sustainability in terms of process has the virtue of being the most robust since it places least reliance on specific substantive achievements. What replaces this is a real commitment by organisations to a process of working with their stakeholders towards acceptable substantive achievements. This commitment strengthens relationships with stakeholders, which intuitively suggests greater social sustainability. Yet this third definition also provides the least satisfying answer to the crucial question as to what an organisation should do, in terms of specific social impacts, to become more socially sustainable. Nevertheless this process-based definition of sustainability will be the basic approach to defining social sustainability taken by this paper building on the relationship between the substantive and process aspects of performance described above.

The discussion above suggests a fundamental property of social agreement: it is achieved as a result of a (social) process. For example the UN Conventions, which represent the nearest thing to a globally acceptable set of substantive social standards, were themselves the result of lengthy negotiations and discussion between many parties. There may also be a time when the process is in equilibrium, and the scale of further changes sharply diminishes. This may be described as social sustainability. For an organisation, this places accountability at the heart of social sustainability.

1.1

In shaping a formal definition of sustainability, it is therefore probably sufficient for the SIGMA project to consider the process conditions which any organisation would have to satisfy in order to be 'socially sustainable'. Previous work has suggested specific conditions for social sustainability. Following this, we can propose the social conditions for the sustainability of an organisation in terms of the level of accountability embodied, as follows:

- ∑ organisations practise stakeholder dialogue and accountability – recognising the needs and values of stakeholders;
- ∑ acceptable social, economic and environmental are stakeholder defined and equitable.

The second condition suggests that sustainable social impacts are stakeholder defined. However, it also suggests the same for economic and environmental impacts. The purpose of this is not to open up the complex issues of how the social, environmental and economic relate to each other, but to underline the component of accountability which is inevitably part of environmental and economic sustainability. In practice, sustainable solutions to environmental and economic problems are reached through dialogue and negotiation, just as they are for social problems. In this sense, accountability is part of the matrix within which social, environmental and economic issues are all set.

Finally, the second condition suggests that sustainable social, environmental and economic impacts are also equitable. The need to add this qualification arises because it is possible for an unstable equilibrium in the process of stakeholder negotiation to arise. This may happen when there is a significant imbalance in the power between different social groups such that a consensus is more apparent than real. An example could be the relative acquiescence of aboriginal groups in Australia to the activities of mining companies – until quite recently.

2.0

Approach



2.1

Methodology

The methodology for the research underlying this paper was to:

- ∑ select a set of suitable standards in conjunction with the SIGMA Peer Review Group for this research theme;
- ∑ conduct desk-based research and analysis of the standards so identified, covering:
 - a. description and critique of each standard;
 - b. analysis of the standard;
- ∑ produce a Working Paper reviewing the findings and submit the paper to peer review;
- ∑ interview by telephone selected organisations drawn from the SIGMA partners, concerning their views of:
 - a. the findings of the desk research;
 - b. their approach to and use of and needs for standards within their organisations;
- ∑ arrange two workshops for SIGMA Partners and other project stakeholders to review the social sustainability research and its relationship to the SIGMA Guidelines;
- ∑ produce the final paper and submit to peer review.

There is a large number of standards, guides and structured approaches relevant to social sustainability. The selection of the standards for analysis was guided by the following considerations:

- ∑ a reasonable diversity of standards in terms of stakeholder coverage and approach;
- ∑ the views of the Peer Review Group;
- ∑ the deliberate inclusion of a major environmental standard.

As part of the selection process, the set of UN and ILO conventions were not directly included. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the UN and ILO standards were not designed to influence organisations, but as guides for the behaviour of governments; secondly a number of standards that were selected (eg SA8000) draw very heavily on the UN and ILO conventions.

2.2

Analysis

The standards, guides, principles and approaches analysed during the desk research were:

- Σ Global Sullivan Principles
- Σ Global Compact
- Σ Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)
- Σ The Natural Step (TNS)
- Σ Balanced Scorecard (BSC)
- Σ European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model
- Σ Investors in People (IIP)
- Σ SA8000
- Σ ETI Base Code
- Σ AA1000
- Σ London Benchmarking Group
- Σ Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)
- Σ Combined Code
- Σ ISO 9000 series of standards

The summary of the analysis may be found in Appendix B. The detailed appraisal of each standard may be found in Appendix C.

2.2

The analysis of the standards assessed each one against the following aspects:

1. Dimensional Cover – recording whether the standard addressed social impacts, environmental impacts and/or economic impacts.
2. Stakeholder Cover – recording which stakeholders are included in (or addressed by) the standard.
3. Process/Substantive – process standards cover the activities of management designed to lead to improved social performance; substantive standards cover the expected area of social performance or the actual performance targeted.
4. Accountability – for the dimensions and stakeholders covered by the standard. Three key aspects of accountability were reviewed: Firstly, whether subscription to the standard implied an assumption of responsibility for an area of social impact, and; secondly, whether stakeholder dialogue was covered; and thirdly whether there was an explicit commitment to take action to improve social performance.
5. Social Management System – for the area the standard covered, each standard was reviewed for the presence of three levels of a management system for social performance: firstly that of vision and principles; secondly that of a practical operational system; thirdly that of specific indicators.
6. Comments – any other comments, strengths or weaknesses were also captured.

The individuals interviewed and their organisations are listed in Appendix D. A summary of the main points arising may be found at Appendix E. The notes from the interviews may be found at Appendix F.

3.0

Findings and Analysis



3.1

General Findings

This research has confirmed the findings of the SIGMA Stage 1 report, namely that there are many overlapping standards relating to the social aspects of sustainability. The analysis also suggested that it is entirely reasonable to look for a full treatment of accountability (a core element of social sustainability as we have seen) even from a standard focusing on environmental or economic performance.

Although it was not the central subject of concern, the research also found that there were very few 'economic' standards available.



3.2

Characteristics of Standards

Social standards are far more than the formal declaration which may be embodied in a code. They are also social institutions in their own right, having functions which may range from promotion to development to monitoring and audit. As a result, in trying to understand what they are trying to achieve, it is important to remember their organisational context. The standards analysed usually originated from either the business world (eg EFQM) or from the campaigning efforts of NGOs (eg SA8000). The former tend to have credibility in the business world, the latter with civil society. However to succeed in improving social performance on a systematic basis, both sorts of credibility are required. Each type of standard is trying to acquire the sort of credibility it lacks. The most recent release of EFQM, for example, uses the language of trust and empowerment, rather than that of the Board Room.

This issue is related to the way in which standards are governed. Recently some standards have been formed with a governance structure which is structured as a partnership between companies, civil society and government. The Global Reporting Initiative and the ETI are examples. These initiatives seem to be particularly robust.

Few standards were centrally concerned with the quality of stakeholder dialogue. As this is central to the definition of social sustainability, this is a serious gap. AA1000 is an exception, as it is centrally concerned with accountability.

The more carefully and narrowly focussed a standard, the more likely it is fully to specify an appropriate management system. Frameworks such as the Global Sullivan Principles, which are very broad in scope, tend to have very little to say about the detailed operational management which might be necessary to implement its requirements. On the other hand, those standards which are tightly focussed, such as Investors in People, which concentrates on a subset of the issues relating to staff, are correspondingly able to specify a management system more fully. This suggests that it is difficult, and would require significant work, to develop a general standard of wide scope with a corresponding detailed management system specification.

Although many of the standards overlap with each other in terms of coverage, there is little cross-referencing of one standard by another – except for reference to UN and ILO Conventions. As a result it may be hard for organisations which have a desire to improve performance in a given area to know which set of standards may be appropriate or which one of a given set it is most sensible to implement first. The solution to this problem is unlikely to be to formulate another standard which is intended to be more inclusive, since this is part of the reason the large number of standards has arisen. (A workable alternative may be to develop a way to map each of the standards with each other.)

Staff, as a stakeholder group, receive the most extensive coverage. However the analysis also identified the following gaps in the coverage of standards:

- ∑ relatively few standards encompass the economic aspects of sustainability to any depth;
- ∑ the performance of organisations towards their suppliers (as opposed to the performance of suppliers themselves, eg with their staff).

3.2.1

3.3

Organisational Use of Standards

Collectively, the organisations surveyed made use of a wide variety of standards, guides and frameworks. The larger organisations making use of more standards than somewhat smaller ones, even where the scope of the standards were overlapping (eg ISO14000 and EMAS). The profusion of standards was also an issue, since it inhibited, rather than encouraged organisations to adopt new standards.

The reasons given for the use of standards were pragmatic, but did not always directly concern operational benefits. The most significant reasons given for the adoption of a standard were to:

- Σ enhance business reputation;
- Σ demonstrate the legitimacy of existing activities.

The GRI was singled out as particularly useful as it defined specific indicators – although the weakness of the GRI on social indicators was acknowledged.

3.4

Need for Guidance

The most prominent issue for which organisations sought guidance was stakeholder dialogue. Among the concerns cited were:

- Σ how to identify stakeholders correctly and how to determine which ones should be involved in stakeholder dialogue. For example given a population of concerned NGOs, which are the more important for consultation;
- Σ how to justify the costs involved in the exercise, and by implication, how to determine appropriate boundaries;
- Σ how to determine what good quality stakeholder dialogue actually involves and how it differs from traditional market research techniques such as questionnaires and focus groups;
- Σ how far stakeholder dialogue is possible in a situation where there are apparently irreconcilable differences, or actual conflict.

Another need expressed was for a way to understand the extent to which adherence to existing standards was necessary to the achievement of sustainability. The need was expressed for a 'map' showing the way in which each standard – eg GRI, SA8000 or EMAS – contributed to the task of managing organisational impacts. This would be helpful at two levels:

- Σ the achievement of substantive performance. In this respect a key need is to have clearly set out what the UN and ILO Conventions actually prescribe;
- Σ the implementation of management systems.

Guidance is also needed for the integration of existing work with standards, guides and approaches. Clearly, it is not feasible for each new standard to require a complete overhaul of existing procedures. On the other hand, some changes will be necessary if the standard is to make a real difference. Guidance is needed on how to strike a balance between these two pressures appropriately. Related to this is the requirement for guidance on what the implementation of a specific standard will entail. Most standards, understandably, are framed in terms specifying the outcome sought (whether of substantive achievement or of management systems). It would be helpful to have guidance on the impact of implementation specific to each standard.

3.4

A recurring theme was the need for a business case for working with all aspects of sustainability. While it was appreciated that each organisation would have its own unique business case, there was nevertheless a feeling that there should be a number of common elements which would be of wide application.

A number of organisations were unclear how their boundary of responsibility might be defined. Guidance would be appreciated on how to approach this task.

Finally, organisations expressed a concern how the theme of innovation fitted within the overall thrust of the SIGMA Project. While appreciating that innovation is crucial to business success at a fundamental level, it was not clear how innovation could be integrated successfully within a management system, beyond a commitment at the level of vision.

4.0

Issues, Conclusions and Recommendations



4.1

The SIGMA Project

The SIGMA Project is already a multi-stakeholder initiative. The research has shown that its long-term success will depend on maintaining this approach, and possibly broadening the range of stakeholders involved. Two points in particular have emerged during the research:

- ∑ the involvement of NGOs in the project has been relatively limited;
- ∑ there has been no involvement of overseas stakeholders, and especially of Southern stakeholders.

It has also emerged that a number of SIGMA organisations are waiting for the project team to issue its guidance before undertaking any other major initiative in the area. While this is clearly a credit to the project, it is also a risk in a number of respects:

- ∑ it may delay urgent action in relation to sustainability;
- ∑ it reduces the activity from which the project could learn.

4.2

The Nature of the SIGMA Guidelines

- Σ An important area that is largely lacking in current standards is that of detailed standards for the quality of stakeholder dialogue. This should be a high priority area for SIGMA..
- Σ Accountability and dialogue is relevant for the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability. The stakeholder aspects of these two 'non-social' areas could be significantly enhanced if accountability and dialogue were systematically built into these standards. This should be a high priority area for SIGMA.
- Σ There are gaps in the coverage of the existing set of standards for stakeholder and issue coverage. SIGMA may want to aim to fill those gaps itself, or commission others to do so.
- Σ The UN and ILO conventions define a set of substantive performance standards enjoying considerable consensus upon which SIGMA can build. It would be unwise for SIGMA to attempt to re-define substantive standards in this area.
- Σ It is not clear how far SIGMA should attempt to define substantive standards (other than in areas covered by the UN and ILO conventions).
- Σ A key element in completing the coverage of existing standards will be to ensure that the 'footprint' of existing standards regarding the requirements of sustainability is clear. Companies will then be able to implement new systems most cost-effectively.
- Σ A key issue will be how far SIGMA chooses to build a full management system specification for a wide range of stakeholders. Current experience suggests that this could be a significant undertaking as it would need to bring a detailed scrutiny to a wide range of issues and involve an extensive programme of consultation beyond the current boundaries of the SIGMA project.

4.3

Potential Tools

This section describes at a high level some of the ideas for tools, suggested during the research, which could become part of the SIGMA toolkit.

- Σ Stakeholder Identification. A number of definitions and ways of identifying stakeholders exist, together with techniques to prioritise them for a given organisation. These could be packaged together to cover definitions, good practice and processes for implementation.
- Σ Responsibility Mapping. This tool would provide a straightforward means of articulating for which stakeholders and issues an organisation is accepting responsibility. While some guidelines are possible what responsibilities might be expected of an organisation addressing its sustainability impacts seriously, it would not be possible to be definitive.
- Σ Quality of Dialogue. A number of techniques have been developed in the past which measure the extent to which the stakeholder dialogue and accountability practised by an organisation can be said to be of good quality. While these have been used with the assistance of third parties, a simpler approach could be developed which could be self-administered.
- Σ The Case for Dialogue. Stakeholders may not always comply with requests for dialogue. Focussing specifically on instances where stakeholder dialogue has been accomplished despite considerable antagonism, this tool would present a small number of case studies, drawn from a wide variety of sources, with some simple guidelines concerning dialogue in conflict situations.
- Σ Implementation Planning. The most likely practical assistance which SIGMA could develop would be as an implementation tool. Such a tool would serve to integrate the tools for stakeholder identification, responsibility mapping and quality of dialogue described above. It would also provide guidelines for the approach and planning for implementation of standards and management systems.
- Σ Standards Analysis. The methodology utilised during the course of this research, and as illustrated in Appendix B, could form the basis of a tool to assess the ground covered by a given standard. Relatively little work should be required to repackage the material of this paper into a standalone form for self-administration.

4.4

Further Research & Development

Over the development of the tools outlined in the last section, there are additional areas of research from which the SIGMA project could benefit. These are:

- ∑ consultation with a wider range of stakeholders than currently included within the SIGMA Project to ensure that its findings are both sufficiently complete and robust;
- ∑ development of a business case. This should not be confined to the social aspects of sustainability alone, but needs to be integrated with the business case for the implementation of sustainability practices across all areas – social, environmental and economic;