

How Does Business Address the Social Justice Dimension of Sustainability?

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Today, academics consider 'sustainability' to encompass social impacts and resulting justice implications as well as environmental impacts. But in the realm of 'Sustainable Business,' the perspective is usually very different. For all the recent discussions surrounding sustainable business, the focus has been nearly always on ecological impacts of business and business activity, while the impacts of business on society, social groups, and communities has been largely overlooked. This is perhaps understandable—the issues are complex, social impacts may be examined at different stakeholder levels (e.g., regions, communities, indigenous populations, employees and families, shareholders, customers, etc.), and metrics designed to indicate impact are less-easily observed and thus harder to document than the smoky discharge from a polluting factory. There are steps being taken toward recognizing, understanding, and measuring social actions and impacts by businesses, though these steps are in the relative early stages compared to ecological impact reporting.

I propose to conduct the following research:

1. review the range of current company practices for reporting and measuring social impacts (both what the company says it plans to do as well as what actual actions the company undertakes);
2. analyze and assess the benefits of these company reporting actions, including benefits to the companies themselves (which might include reputational impact, public relations value, stock valuation, market share, among possible measures) as well as benefits to the various social stakeholders with whom the company engages (which might include any or all of: employees, employee families, communities, indigenous groups, regional groups); and
3. develop a framework of current best practices and metrics for describing and assessing the social impacts of companies.

Results from this research will be publishable in both academic and practitioner-oriented sustainable business publications and it will enrich teaching in sustainable business at Seattle University and other schools who use the resulting best practices framework.