

ISO 26000 on social responsibility now published as a DIS

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The DIS (Draft International Standard) version of the future ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility has now been published. The text is improved and partly more clear and accurate. The DIS version does not present any radical changes to the CD version. The development of the standard is based on consensus reached in intense debates where experts in this diverse Working Group of the international ISO forum have put their views on the table. Some amendments are certainly of great importance.

The ISO 26000 standard "provides guidance on principles and practices relating to social responsibility and other issues relevant to organisations when implementing and integrating social responsibility into the everyday practices of the organisation", states the standard. The more than 100 pages hold a lot of information and the standard is to be considered as a handbook, not as a management standard.

Definitions added and amended

The standard provides a list of definitions of relevance to social responsibility. The definitions are evaluated and thoroughly discussed to see if they really reflect the concept of social responsibility and the world we live in today.

The definition of "Consumer" is added to emphasise the difference to that of "Customer". Consumers purchase or use products and services only for private purposes while customers can do it also for commercial or public purposes. The definitions of "Organisation", "Product" and "Verification" are added as well.

The definition of "Sphere of influence" is well discussed during the ISO meetings and is now slightly revised and it reads "area of political, contractual or economic relationships across which an organisation has the ability to affect the decisions or activities of individuals or organisations. NOTE Area can be understood in a geographic sense, as well as in a functional sense.

In chapter 7.3.2 some guidance is given on Sphere of influence. Although there are no one size solutions, organisations are left without any concrete help in assessing how far responsibility should extend with respect to the supply chain. Consumers want to get information on issues concerning how and where the raw material is produced, while large companies say it is impossible to efficiently assess tens of thousands of suppliers.

Political questions

It has been clearly stated that the standard is not intended to create a non-tariff barrier to trade, but especially US and Canadian delegates of the working group have expressed their concern about this issue. The following text is included in the standard: "However, for purposes of the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization (WTO) it is not intended to be interpreted as an "international standard", "guideline" or "recommendation"."

During the Quebec meeting in May some countries, especially China and India, wanted persistently to change the text concerning the concept of international norms of behaviour. The Chinese delegates expressed that only mentioning the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not sufficient and referred on a general level to other instruments. The DIS text thus reads

"Although expectations of responsible behaviour will vary between countries and cultures, organisations should nevertheless respect international norms of behaviour such as those laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other instruments". The last three words were added to reach a compromise. The change seems minor, but can have great consequences if the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are not considered as fundamental.

Further changes

The well debated Annex, that provides a list of voluntary initiatives and tools for social responsibility, is not deleted, but amended and new organisations added. The issue of animal welfare is included in the standard, environmental impact assessment is added to the list of environmental considerations, contracted labour should also be analysed when considering the characteristics of the organisation's workforce or employees, corporate social responsibility should be incorporated not only into purchasing but also into investment practices etc. - just to mention a few amendments.

The way forward

A five-month balloting period (from 14 September 2009 to 14 February 2010) has now begun during which the national member bodies of ISO will be able to vote and comment on the text. Participating liaison organisations can also comment. The comments will be discussed at the next meeting of the ISO Working Group on Social Responsibility (ISO/WG SR), which is developing ISO 26000, in May 2010.

If the DIS vote is successful, the document, with eventual modifications, will then be circulated to the ISO members as a Final Draft International Standard (FDIS). If that vote is positive, ISO 26000 will then be published as an International Standard in late 2010.

For more information:

ISO, www.iso.org/sr

ISO/DIS 26000 Guidance on social responsibility,
<http://isotc.iso.org/livelink/livelink?func=ll&objId=3935837&objAction=browse&sort=name>