National Institute for Environmental Studies, Japan

Policy theme

Sustainability Certification

Target audience

Policymakers for sustainability and the environment, organizations of sustainability certifications, and companies committing to sustainability

The problem

Vague criteria about 'sustainability'

Policy options for resolving the problem

A minimum set of considerations for sustainability

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Background

Sustainability has become an essential aspect of business. The need for investors to determine whether an investee company claiming to take actions for sustainability is genuinely "sustainable," and the need for consumers to determine whether a product is genuinely "sustainable" is increasing. With respect to the former, the EU has been considering the 'taxonomy' for sustainable finance, while with respect to the latter, a method of quantifying progress in sustainable public procurement, targeted by SDG 12.7, is under development. Self-declaration of sustainability tends to be misleading or incomplete, and therefore to prevent false claims or vague assertions of sustainability, it is necessary to ensure that entities making genuine sustainability efforts are appropriately recognized and valued.

Minimum set of considerations for sustainability

Given the global adoption of sustainability practices, it is possible to deduce general principles that guide these practices empirically. Tasaki et al. (2016) extracted pertinent principles for sustainability from 590 provisions in 25 sustainability certifications and initiatives, which were subsequently categorized into (a) environmental maintenance, (b) social and economic development, and (c) institutional collateral (Table 1).

The major items in each major category can be considered the most popular and practically important considerations for sustainability worldwide. This policy brief proposes considerations that account for 20% or more of each category as the minimum set of considerations for sustainability, as follows:

a) Environmental sustainability:
- Efficient use of resources and reduction of environmental impact.
- Conservation of natural environment and ecosystems.
b) Social and economic development:
- Protection of basic human rights, health, and property, ensuring they are not in a state of impairment.
- Ensuring fair working conditions.
- Respect for needs and values important to local societies and communities.
c) Institutional collateral:
- Ensure the realization of the above items (one or more of the following: planning, monitoring/assessment of implementation, establishment of a section in charge, assignment of roles, management capability, and raising awareness).

Table 1 Categories of Sustainability Criteria Utilized in 25 Sustainable Certification Schemes and Initiatives (retrieved from Tasaki et al., 2016)

Category			Percentage in the major category
1. Ensuring environmental sustainability (n=194)	Efficient use of resources and reduction of environmental impact		47%
	Conservation of natural environment and ecosystems		36%
	Daly's three principles	The speed of use of recycled resources and nature should not exceed the speed of their regeneration	9%
		The utilization rate of non-renewable resources should not exceed the substitution rate of resource utilization	5%
		The discharge speed of waste into the ecosystem must not exceed the natural purification speed	4%
2. Meeting social and economic development needs (n=216)	Satisfying basic needs	Protection of basic human rights, health, and property, ensuring they are not in a state of impairment	22%
		Ensuring fair working conditions	30%
	Satisfying advanced needs	Respect for the needs and values that are important to local societies and communities	22%
		Being able to satisfy diverse needs in a complex manner	17%
		Fair access to resources, nature, etc.	6%
	Others (wide range of action choices, ensuring diversity)		3%
3. Strengthening institutions and achieving targets (n=180)	Enhancing controllability to achieve the above items (including planning, implementation, monitoring/assessment, continuous improvement, assignment of roles and responsibility, management capability, and awareness-raising)		57%
	Preventive and precautionary measures		17%
	Legal compliance		15%
	Others		11%

* Numbers in parentheses represent the number of provisions in a major category.

Reference

Tasaki T., Kameyama Y., Oshima M., Motoki H. (2016) Sustainability Criteria Used in 25 Initiatives and Certification Programs: Towards Setting of Criteria for Sustainable Procurement and Conceptualizing of Sustainability. Environmental Science, 29 (6), 305-314. (in Japanese) <http://doi.org/10.11353/sesj.29.305>