

Perspectives on standards and certification

About us. Achieving your mission matters to us. Our passion is working with initiatives to effectively and efficiently achieve their economic, social, environmental and organizational goals.

Knowledge, connecting the dots, ideas and solutions: tap into our diversity of skills and practical experience. We've been working with and for standards systems and their stakeholders, including the private sector, governments and NGOs. We bring over 25 years of knowledge, experiences and perspectives to help you see and do things more clearly and differently. We'll help you move quickly and more strategically to deliver greater impact. Are you ready? Get in touch – we'd love to hear from you.

Interests & Conflicts of Interest

When do interests become conflicts of interest?

The concept of a 'conflict of interest' implies that a person has a vested interest in one outcome over another, and that this may influence that person's actions or advice inappropriately.

Vested interests can be many and varied. Sometimes the interest is obvious – perhaps there is personal financial benefit or cost associated with one outcome rather than another. But there are numerous more subtle interests – potential advantages or disadvantages to oneself, or to family members, friends, employers, clients (or potential clients) colleagues or peer groups, or to one's reputation. Any of those things might affect one's judgement, consciously or unconsciously.

Even if someone stands to benefit directly from a particular outcome, their views on the matter are not necessarily wrong. Multi-stakeholder processes are explicitly designed to seek out and understand the views of people with interests – that is the definition of a stakeholder. So-called 'independent experts' are likely to have a range of relationships with stakeholders in their field, as well as coming to an issue with their own prior opinions and influences. As a BBC report on the issue of 'net neutrality' put it, "the perceived line between expertise and vested interest is extremely thin".

That is not to say that interests are irrelevant. It is generally useful to know whether someone has a vested interest in one outcome over another. Perhaps you would want to scrutinise their arguments more carefully and make sure you hear from others with different interests, to hear other opinions.

Transparency and balance are critically important, but ultimately it is the strength of the argument and the evidence that matters. And our advice? Listen to what people have to say – even those with interests - and draw your own conclusions.

Standard or Index?

One of the first rules before developing a new standard is to ask: does it already exist? But perhaps even before that, we should ask: is a standard the right tool for the job?

After listening to an enthusiastic colleague who wanted to develop a new standard, the idea that was taking shape was not a standard, but a sustainability index. Using publicly available information, an index can assess a company's sustainability performance on a range of issues with the emphasis on good practice and learning.

Standards bodies and donors alike know that to develop a standard can be a lengthy, costly and complex process. What is often less understood is that a standard is one part of a far larger 'standard system' that requires a significant number of steps to achieve desired outcomes and deliver impact. A sustainability index may be faster to develop and could more easily respond to changes in certain dynamic and fast-moving markets.

An index can encourage continuous improvement in responsible companies (across specific themes) by transparently ranking their performance on implementing good practices, procedures and policies. Such an index could publicly highlight leading good practice and give high performing companies a bronze, silver or gold award.

Admittedly, there are different sustainability index models e.g. the index could develop a set of indicators to assess companies based on public domain data searches. These initial reports are then shared with companies and verified through self-assessment. This is then followed by further analyses and scoring by the index owner. Companies could opt in - but those that didn't would still be included in the ranking.

Conventional wisdom says it is always best to choose the right tool for the job.

We were all deeply saddened to hear the news that Jason Potts died on January 31st. He was a light in the field and we are committed to work to honor his legacy of positive persistence.

Benchmarking Theories of Change

How might we better compare and contrast standards systems?

Benchmarking has become trendy! The ISEAL Alliance has even produced a guide to help companies, benchmarking initiatives and individuals evaluate and compare sustainability standards and understand what's important to make informed decisions about which standard systems to use. The guide highlights scheme management, standard-setting, assurance, chain of custody, claims and labels. Note that the guide does not highlight Theories of Change or M&E systems, which are crucial components of standards systems.

Many standards take holistic and systemic approaches. In other words, they have tools beyond standards and certification that enable change.

Furthermore, they use standards in unique ways to deliver outcomes and drive impacts. They know that standards and certification alone cannot solve the problem.

Benchmarking exercises could and should start with a comparative analysis of the Theory of Change. It is the vision of change. Only by understanding the strategies, the drivers and the assumptions that underpin a Theory of Change can one see the stark differences in standard system approaches. Furthermore, what a standard system measures will differ—and we know that what gets measured is what matters.

To better understand the nuanced but significant differences across commodities and sectors, let's start benchmarking Theories of Change.

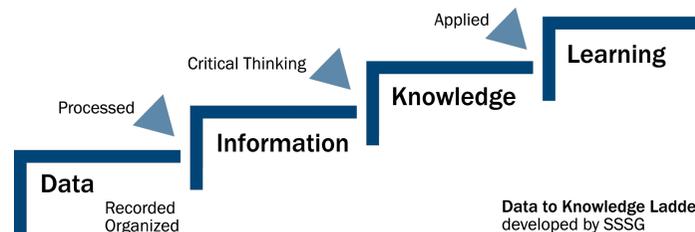
Big Data? SMART Data!

One of the hottest words of 2017 was data, especially in the standards community. There were special conference sessions, launch of the data skills lab, webinars and project funding around data. It has moved from the realm of Monitoring and Evaluation, to understanding that data underpins all of the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice for credibility and added value. We have also seen more data-related criteria move into the revisions of the Assurance Code.

While we hear the demand for more data, many standards are already overwhelmed with the volume and multiple formats of data they already possess. We don't need to talk about Big Data – rather we need to talk about SMART data and focus on leveraging data for knowledge and learning. Currently many systems spend the majority, some 80%, of their time recording, organizing and processing data to turn it into information. And have little time for sense-making of this and learning.

How can organizations in our standards community transform their data and turn it into learning? Create a coherent data strategy, improved data skills and IT help - but start by being SMART!

- S – small strategic data sets
- M – measurable and meaningful
- A – accessible (digitize and collect as close to the source as possible)
- R – reliable (complete and error free)
- T – tied to your Theory of Change



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