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A documentary review in order to identifying the relationship between labour and sustainability in operations

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Abstract

The topic labour is mentioned from the earliest officially United Nations' documents related to sustainability. However, their approach has been done differently over time. Thus, this paper presents a revisit of sustainability documents, with the intention of identifying the relationship between work and sustainability in these documents.

Keywords: Sustainability, Social Responsibility, Labour Practices, Working Conditions.

Introduction

According some authors (e.g. Elkington, 1994 and 1998; Savitz & Weber, 2006), sustainability accomplish, at least, three dimensions: economic, environmental and social dimension. However, it is common to mention that sustainability originated from strictly environmental issues and, only some years later, its scope was broadened to issues in social and economic dimension (Kissinger et al, 2011). Nevertheless, based on a document analysis, it was possible to identify that social dimension has been present since the earliest official document related to sustainable development (i.e. Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 1972). Moreover, issues

related to labour (a social dimension aspect) were also usually present since the earliest sustainability documents.

Therefore, based on a documental review, this exploratory study investigated how the subject labour is mentioned and discussed in official sustainability documents and also in corporate sustainability initiatives. It was possible to identify and analyze:

- How labour and its related aspects have been addressed in corporate sustainability initiatives (i.e. Corporate Social Responsibility);

- How is the relationship between corporate sustainability initiatives and the sustainability official documents;

- How labour and its related aspects have been addressed in sustainability documents; and

- How social aspects have been addressed in sustainability documents.

Methodology and methods

The study begun identifying key corporate initiatives related to Corporate Social Responsibility that are mentioned at ISO26000 - Guidance on Social Responsibility (ISO, 2010). Into its annex A (examples of voluntary initiatives and tools for social responsibility) there is a list which presents a governmental and nongovernmental initiatives that address the seven Social Responsibility core subjects:

- Organizational governance;

- Human rights;

- Labour practices;

- Environment;

- Fair operating practices;

- Consumer issues; and

- Community involvement and development.

It is important to highlight that Labour Practices is one of this core subjects. Hence, it was selected 5 initiatives that met the following criteria:

a) It must address Labour Practices issues;

b) The information access must be free of charges; and

c) It must have a globally representative framework and / or a Brazilian representative framework.

The following are the five initiatives:

- ISO26000 (globally representative framework);

- United Nations Global Compact (globally representative framework);

- Global Reporting Initiative Sustainability – GRI (globally representative framework);

- Ethos Institute - Ethos indicators of CSR (Brazilian representative framework);

- Social Accountability International - SA8000 (globally representative framework).

As it was mentioned before, the analysis enabled to identify how labour and its related aspects have been addressed at corporate sustainability initiatives.

At the second part of the study, it was carried out an official document analysis. Table 1 shows the most often cited sustainability documents prepared by the United Nations at the earlier selected corporate initiatives.

It has been held a classification at every paragraph from each document, which it was indicated labour aspects presence or their absence. Some keywords helped us to locate

these paragraphs, as: labour, work, worker(s), employee(s), employment, job(s), labour practice(s), work condition(s). In a second triage, it was carried out a classification refinement, considering how this subject was approached. This categorization was built during the analysis as the most striking items were emerged.

Table 1: United Nations' official sustainability documents analyzed

YEAR	DOCUMENTS
1972	Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. (UN, 1972)
1987	Our Common Future (UN, 1987)
1992	Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. (UN, 1992) Agenda 21. (UN, 1992)
2000	The United Nations Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000)
2002	Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development. (UN, 2002)
2005	2005 World Summit Outcome (UN, 2005)

Thus, it was possible to identify how labour and its related aspects have been addressed in sustainability documents. Besides, it was also possible to study the relationship between corporate sustainability initiatives and the sustainability official documents. In addition, the analysis also highlighted relevant cited documents related to labour. Table 2 presents these documents (or concepts). Hence, with this additional information, it was possible to build a network between all documents analyzed.

Table 2: Labour documents mentioned at sustainability official documents

YEAR	DOCUMENTS
1944	ILO Constitution. (ILO, 1944)
1948	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)
Several	ILO Conventions (ILO, several years)
1966	United Nations Convention: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (UN, 1966)
1966	United Nations Convention: International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, (UN, 1966)
1998	Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. (ILO, 1998)
-	Decent Work (Ghai, 2008)

At last, as social dimension includes labour, it was also identified how social aspects have been addressed in sustainability documents.

Results and analysis

a) Relationship between sustainability initiatives and document

The initiatives content analysis identified 15 relevant items about labour. Four of them have been present in all initiatives:

1) Freedom of association and collective bargaining (ILO, 1948 & ILO 1949);

2) Elimination of forced labor (ILO, 1930 & ILO 1957);

3) Abolition of child labor (ILO, 1973 & ILO 1999); and

4) Elimination of discrimination in the workplace (ILO, 1951 & ILO 1958);.

The second part of the study involved the analysis of the sustainability documents which are mentioned in the initiatives. The cited labour documents were also identified. In Figure 1 the left documents deal specifically on sustainability, while the right is related to the topic labour and/or human rights. According to the analysis of the relationships between these documents, it was noted that the latest documents comprise most of the documents prepared earlier, if not all.
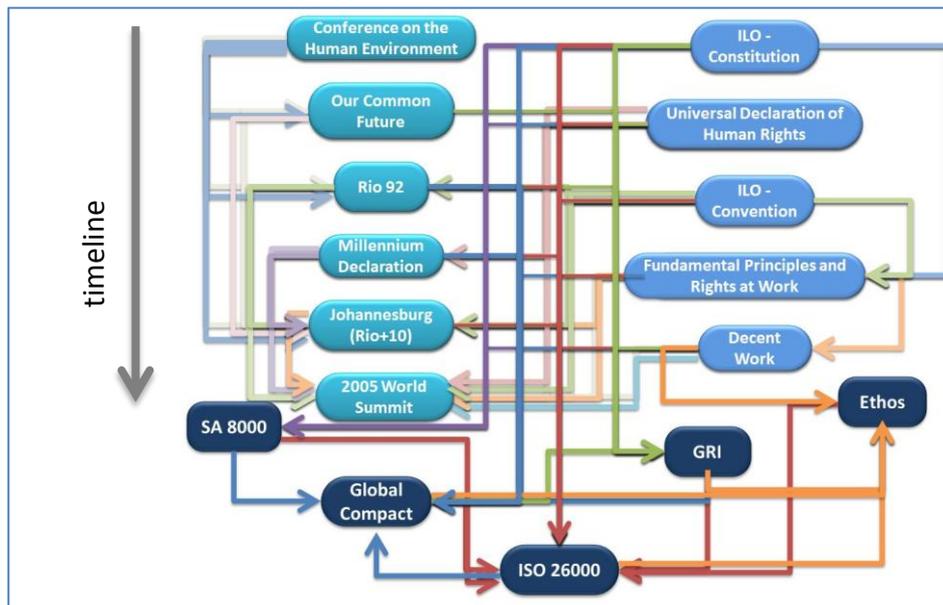

Figure 1: Relationships - 1) between initiatives, 2) between initiatives and documents, and 3) between the documents sustainability, 4) between the document and the sustainability of work. (Prepared by the authors)

b) Addressing the issue labour in sustainability documents

Here are some excerpts from the sustainability documents to illustrate how labour is approached and mentioned.

- Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, "28. We also agree to provide assistance to increase income-generating employment opportunities, taking into account the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of the ILO."

- 2005 World Summit Outcome: "47. We strongly support fair globalization and resolve to make the goals of full and productive employment and decent work."

Furthermore, the analysis of these documents also identified the documents related to the labour's topic most frequently cited: the Constitution of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ILO Conventions, the ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the ILO Decent Work concept.

c) Sustainability social aspects

Some documents excerpts are cited here to illustrate how the social aspects are mentioned in these texts.

- Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment: "1. Man is both creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth."

- 2005 World Summit Outcome: "4. We reaffirm that our common fundamental values, including freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for all human rights […] 9. We acknowledge that peace and security, development and human rights are the pillars […] for collective security and well-being. […] 49. We will promote sustainable consumption and production patterns…"

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study identified which aspects of the sustainability social dimension are present from the earliest sustainability documents. For instance, the first United Nations' official document, the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment - 1972, proclaims in his fifth paragraph that "…of all things in the world, people are the most precious."

In particular, the issue labour is often cited, despite its evolution and its approach. Hence, to consider sustainability, at least according to the documents studied, it requires the involvement of labour aspects.

In entrepreneurship initiatives, there was a predominance of four items. These are: freedom of association and collective bargaining, elimination of all forms of forced labor, abolition of all forms of child labor, and elimination of discrimination in the workplace. In addition, labour is addresses on business-driven sustainability initiatives mainly based on the same set of documents on sustainability, labour and human rights. In general, there are five basic documents:

- The Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment;

- Our Common Future;

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

- The ILO Constitution; and

- The ILO Conventions.

Among the historical documents, it is clear four themes that have been incorporated over time: job security and stability; health and safety at work; consideration of the contents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on

Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work; and Decent Work. In particular, the Decent Work (Ghai, 2008) concept is the most comprehensive, involving all other approaches, and even issues forced and child labor issues. At the same time, some production and operations systems, even with a decent working condition, can also cause negative impacts to workers, both from the standpoint of physical and mental health but also the quality of life and well-being.

It should be noted that social aspects of sustainability cited in the documents refers to a wider situation, treating the centrality of human beings, interdependence, a caring society, a healthy and productive life. In this sense, establishing a production system considered "sustainable" implies also a social dimension view, which ensures the workers' physical and mental well-being. Despite the proactive labour practices and working conditions improvement, mental illness, often caused by an invisible pressure to achieve goals is increasingly present in organizations. Thus, addressing the issues related to labour and other the social dimension aspects - such as health, well-being and human development – is extremely relevant for new organizations involved in sustainability and social responsibility.

At the same time, it raises a deeper question: why labour, in a wider approach, do not belong to the corporate agenda? It is important to point out environmental issues were not presented in discussion, or they were not a restriction, until 1970s. However, environmental issues became so important that, nowadays, it is one part of the equation. Environmental issues are not adjustment variables anymore. And, although some labour issues are addressed and have their part at the agenda, as child and forced labour, there is no room to mental health and disorders triggered by labour pressure and others invisible and indirect causes. Unfortunately, it still remains an adjustment variable.

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