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Guidelines for contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO document should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives).

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This document was prepared by Project Committee ISO/PC 343, *Sustainable development goals management*.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

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Introduction

0.1 General

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for an equitable future — peace and prosperity for all people and the planet.[21]

At its heart are the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries — developed and developing — in a global partnership. However, governments alone cannot achieve the SDGs.

Achieving the SDGs requires all countries and sectors (individuals, governments, the public sector, civil society, not-for-profit organizations and the private sector) to work together in new ways, to make the goals a reality. Creativity, knowledge, innovation and financial resources from all of society are needed to develop new solutions, business models, and ways of working and being, which support sustainability, regeneration, inclusion, equality and ultimately, achievement of the SDGs.

As much as the SDGs need the private sector to realize the aspiration of the 2030 Agenda, increasingly the private sector also needs progress to be made on the SDGs in order to survive and to thrive in the future. Organizations depend on the ongoing viability and stability of environmental and social systems, which are increasingly under pressure. This is creating both risks and opportunities for organizations.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, wars and the increasing effects of climate change, the SDGs are more relevant at the time of publication of this document than when the SDGs were launched in 2015. It is easy to become discouraged by the many setbacks which hinder progress towards achieving the goals. Nevertheless, there have been extraordinary achievements. Between 2015 and 2022, the amount of people with internet access worldwide rose from 3,2 billion to 5,3 billion. Such improvements show how technology and innovation can be effective enablers for sustainable development and achievement of the SDGs. While there is still progress to be made, focus should be placed on what works and where public and private sector decisions can make the most difference. Wise and bold decisions with foresight matter.

This document provides guidance on how an organization can manage and optimize its contribution to the SDGs and how it can embed sustainability into its operations and decision-making processes, thus giving organizations confidence that their contributions are performed in a holistic and systematic way. By actively managing how it contributes to the SDGs, an organization can optimize its impacts on interested parties and related SDG targets by minimizing negative impacts and maximizing positive ones, thereby strengthening organizational resilience and future performance.

This document does not provide requirements for implementing a management system. An organization does not need to have a formal management system in place to use this document, however organizations with a management system can find it useful to implement these guidelines within such a system. For that reason, this document is broadly aligned to the ISO Harmonized Structure for management system standards.

This document includes guidance on:

— setting ambitious impact objectives and targets, aligned with the relevant SDG targets and indicators where practicable, to optimize impacts on interested parties and contribution to the UN SDGs;

— engaging with relevant interested parties to identify and prioritize actual and expected impacts, whether beneficial or adverse;

— collecting data on actual and expected impacts;

— generating options that support innovation, and making informed choices between those options;

— making decisions that take into account the risk tolerance and appetite of those experiencing the impacts of the organization's decisions and activities;

— understanding and managing trade-offs to increase impact at a rate commensurate with planetary needs, and to achieve the SDGs and the needs and expectations of those experiencing impacts.

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This document is intended to help shift an organization from SDG alignment to SDG action: from thinking about the SDGs as a mere “add-on”, to placing SDGs at the core of business operations.

This document can assist organizations to better align business purpose, strategy and results with societal needs, and to shift expectations. It can help organizations to be more accountable for their impacts on people and the planet, while also strengthening business performance. It encourages organizations to explore different business models and new ways of working that accelerate innovation (e.g. by driving the development of new products, services and solutions that can lead to new customers and market opportunities) and allocate resources more effectively. Implementing the recommendations in this document can enable organizations to anticipate risks and opportunities related to sustainable development earlier and manage them better. This document can also help organizations to communicate more effectively with governments, regulators, NGOs, partners, investors and other interested parties, including those impacted most by the organization’s decisions and activities. It can also help organizations to meet the requirements and expectations of these aforementioned parties, concerning the growing and various needs for disclosure, reporting and audit.

0.2 The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs comprise 17 integrated and indivisible goals grounded in human rights, set across five dimensions (people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace) and backed by 169 targets.[21] The central vision of the SDGs is to “leave no one behind”. The SDGs recognize that action in one area will impact others, and that development must balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all the while tackling climate change and working to preserve life on land and under water.

The UN SDGs are:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

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The 169 targets associated with the SDGs are the minimum sustainable development thresholds that all UN Member States have agreed are needed to ensure a more sustainable and inclusive future for all. In effect, failing to achieve the SDGs is a major systemic risk for the world, as it jeopardizes the social and ecological systems which are relied upon to live, work, produce, consume and invest.

Significant investment and activity should be specifically redirected towards achieving the SDGs and new solutions at the scale where they are needed most. At the same time, a more holistic approach should be taken and the economic and political system should be transformed, creating a more sustainable and regenerative growth model, where no one is left behind.

This document has been developed in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is based on the UNDP's SDG Impact Standards,[20] related guidance documents and relevant ISO standards. Together these documents provide organizations with a common approach to fully integrate sustainable development and the SDGs into all business and investment decision-making processes and serve a basis for providing assurance to key interested parties.

This document is founded on the concept of Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA). The PDCA concept is an iterative process used by organizations to achieve continual improvement. It can be applied to an organization to support development of a mindset of continual improvement and to each of its individual elements, as follows:

a) Plan: determine and assess risks, opportunities, establish SDG objectives and processes necessary to deliver results in accordance with the organization's SDG policy and ambition;

b) Do: implement the processes as planned;

c) Check: monitor and measure activities and processes with regard to the SDG policy and SDG objectives, and report the results;

d) Act: take actions to continually improve performance to achieve the intended results.

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Guidelines for contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

1 Scope

This document provides guidance for an organization to manage and optimize its contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and to:

— identify, prioritize and manage its impacts on interested parties;

— embed sustainable development into its strategy, operations and decision-making, in all its activities, in a systematic and holistic way;

— enhance and demonstrate its work and performance towards achievement of the SDGs, notably including by maximizing its beneficial impacts and minimizing adverse impacts on interested parties, especially under-recognized and vulnerable groups.

NOTE 1 This document supports the current UN SDGs and any subsequent UN Global Goals that supersede the 2030 SDGs.

NOTE 2 This document is aligned to and supports the UNDP SDG Impact Standards for Enterprises.[21]

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2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

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For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

— ISO Online browsing platform: available at https://www.iso.org/obp

— IEC Electropedia: available at https://www.electropedia.org/

3.1
organization
person or group of people that has its own functions with responsibilities, authorities and relationships to achieve its *objectives* (3.6)

Note 1 to entry: The concept of organization includes, but is not limited to, sole-trader, company, corporation, firm, enterprise, authority, partnership, charity or institution, or part or combination thereof, whether incorporated or not, public or private.

Note 2 to entry: If the organization is part of a larger entity, the term “organization” refers only to the part of the larger entity that is within the scope of the *management system* (3.4).

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3.2
interested party
person or *organization* (3.1) that can affect, be affected by, or perceive itself to be affected by a decision or activity

Note 1 to entry: In this document the concept of interested party (also known as 'stakeholder') includes the planet, society, the environment, ecosystems and future generations. An interested party unable to advocate on its own behalf can be represented by an organization or other interested party.

Note 2 to entry: In this document, relevant interested parties include groups that are likely to experience impacts as a result of the organization's operations and groups that are likely to affect the organization's *performance* (3.11). Interested parties also encompass those who contribute to the generation of impacts.

Note 3 to entry: In this document, some interested parties both experience and contribute to impacts.

3.3
top management
person or group of people who directs and controls an *organization* (3.1) at the highest level

Note 1 to entry: Top management has the power to delegate authority and provide resources within the organization.

Note 2 to entry: If the scope of the *management system* (3.3) covers only part of an organization, then top management refers to those who direct and control that part of the organization.

Note 3 to entry: The term top management includes, but is not limited to, governing body, governing group, board of directors, sole director and trustees.

3.4
management system
set of interrelated or interacting elements of an *organization* (3.1) to establish *policies* (3.5) and *objectives* (3.6), as well as *processes* (3.8) to achieve those objectives

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Note 1 to entry: A management system can address a single discipline or several disciplines.

Note 2 to entry: The management system elements include the organization's structure, roles and responsibilities, planning and operation.

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3.5
policy
intentions and direction of an *organization* (3.1) as formally expressed by its *top management* (3.3)

3.6
objective
result to be achieved

Note 1 to entry: An objective can be strategic, tactical, or operational.

Note 2 to entry: Objectives can relate to different disciplines (such as finance, health and safety, and environment). They can be, for example, organization-wide or specific to a project, product or *process* (3.8).

Note 3 to entry: An objective can be expressed in other ways, e.g. as an intended result, as a *purpose* (3.41), as an operational criterion, as an SDG objective or by the use of other words with similar meaning (e.g. aim, goal, or target).

Note 4 to entry: In the context of *management systems* (3.4), objectives are set by the *organization* (3.1), consistent with the *policy* (3.5), to achieve specific results.

3.7
risk
effect of uncertainty

Note 1 to entry: An effect is a deviation from the expected — positive or negative.

Note 2 to entry: Uncertainty is the state, even partial, of deficiency of information related to, understanding or knowledge of, an event, its consequence, or likelihood.

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Note 3 to entry: Risk is often characterized by reference to potential events (as defined in ISO Guide 73) and consequences (as defined in ISO Guide 73), or a combination of these.

Note 4 to entry: Risk is often expressed in terms of a combination of the consequences of an event (including changes in circumstances) and the associated likelihood (as defined in ISO Guide 73) of occurrence.

3.8
process
set of interrelated or interacting activities that uses or transforms *inputs* (3.23) to deliver a result

Note 1 to entry: Whether the result of a process is called an output, a product or a service depends on the context of the reference.

3.9
competence
ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve intended results

3.10
documented information
information required to be controlled and maintained by an *organization* (3.1) and the medium on which it is contained

Note 1 to entry: Documented information can be in any format and media and from any source.

Note 2 to entry: Documented information can refer to:

— the *management system* (3.4) including related *processes* (3.8);

— information created in order for the organization to operate (documentation);

— evidence of results achieved (records).

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3.11
performance
measurable result

Note 1 to entry: Performance can relate either to quantitative or qualitative findings.

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Note 2 to entry: Performance can relate to managing activities, *processes* (3.8), products, services, systems or *organizations* (3.1).

3.12
continual improvement
recurring activity to enhance *performance* (3.11)

3.13
effectiveness
extent to which planned activities are realized and planned results are achieved

3.14
requirement
need or expectation that is stated, generally implied or obligatory

Note 1 to entry: "Generally implied" means that it is custom or common practice for the *organization* (3.1) and *interested parties* (3.2) that the need or expectation under consideration is implied.

Note 2 to entry: A specified requirement is one that is stated, e.g. in *documented information* (3.10).

3.15
nonconformity
non-fulfilment of a *requirement* (3.14)

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3.16
corrective action
action to eliminate the cause(s) of a *nonconformity* (3.15) and to prevent recurrence

3.17
audit
systematic and independent *process* (3.8) for obtaining evidence and evaluating it objectively to determine the extent to which the audit criteria are fulfilled

Note 1 to entry: An audit can be an internal audit (first party) or an external audit (second party or third party), and it can be a combined audit (combining two or more disciplines).

Note 2 to entry: An internal audit is conducted by the *organization* (3.1) itself, or by an external party on its behalf.

Note 3 to entry: "Audit evidence" and "audit criteria" are defined in ISO 19011.

3.18
measurement
process (3.8) to determine a *value* (3.32)

3.19
monitoring
determining the status of a system, a *process* (3.8) or an activity

Note 1 to entry: To determine the status, there can be a need to check, supervise or critically observe.

3.20
verification
confirmation, through the provision of objective evidence, that specified *requirements* (3.14) have been fulfilled

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Note 1 to entry: Distinctions are made in this document between the terms *validation* (3.40), *monitoring* (3.19) and verification:

— validation is applied prior to an activity and provides information about the capability to deliver intended results;

— monitoring is applied during an activity and provides information for action within a specified time frame;

— verification is applied after an activity and provides information for confirmation of conformity.

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[SOURCE: ISO 22000:2018, 3.45]

3.21
participation
involvement in decision-making

[SOURCE: ISO 45001:2018, 3.4, modified — note 1 to entry has been removed.]

3.22
consultation
seeking views before making a decision

[SOURCE: ISO 45001:2018, 3.5, modified — note 1 to entry has been removed.]

3.23
input
that which is transformed by an activity into an output

[SOURCE: ISO 20534:2018, 3.26]

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