

**Social Responsibility Guidelines & Sustainable  
Development: Integrating a Common Goal of a  
Sustainable Society**

Neil Pegram, Simon Goldsmith, Anastasia Dewangga

*Blekinge Institute of Technology, School of Engineering, Karlskrona, Sweden*

Anastasia Dewangga: anastasiadewATyahoo.com, Canada

Simon Goldsmith: simontgoldsmithATgmail.com, UK

Neil Pegram: npeggramATsent.com, Canada

## **Abstract**

Given the global sustainability challenge; effective organizational Social Responsibility (SR) guidelines must set best-practices that acknowledge environmental constraints and strive for a sustainable society. SR has historically underrepresented environmental issues and needs to shift from a reactive focus on societal stakeholder demands, to a proactive whole-systems sustainability planning framework. There is a risk that unless SR guidelines consider both social and environmental issues together, they may fail at meeting their stated objectives and generate negative outcomes to organizational viability. This research finds key Sustainable Development concepts that should be integrated within SR guidelines and uncovers a common overall goal of both SR and SD as assisting organizations in moving towards a sustainable society. A Sustainable Society is defined in the research according to a set of scientific principles, based on environmental constraints and fundamental social needs. This clear goal enables the organization to 'backcast' from this success point in order to take effective strategic steps. The authors recommend the incorporation of critical concepts from Strategic Sustainable Development, a proven organizational sustainability planning framework, into SR guidelines to increase their effectiveness in strategic SR decision-making. A case study of the ISO 26000 SR guideline development process, along with multiple expert surveys and interviews, are used to assess the current understanding and application of sustainability concepts in the SR community and to develop recommendations for future SR guidelines.

*Keywords: Social Responsibility, CSR, Strategic Sustainable Development, ISO 26000, Corporate Sustainability, Sustainability.*

## Introduction

*"A good company delivers excellent products and services, and a great company does all that and strives to make the world a better place." - William Ford Jr, Chairman, Ford Motor Co.*

Organizational Social Responsibility programs are now recognized as an increasingly valuable part of business; yet daily headlines continue to report workers' rights violations, product recalls and severe environmental based threats (Elkington, 1997; Schutter, 2008; Svedson et al, 2001). Almost every ecological system is experiencing a wide range of negative impacts from societal and organizational decisions (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MES), 2005, Halpern et al, 2008). Exhausting demands on non-renewable resources and accumulating pollution levels are undermining current and future human needs (Holmberg and Robèrt, 2000; MES, 2005). In response to a heightened global awareness of ecological and social sustainability issues, organizations are now under increasing scrutiny, as citizens and governmental stakeholders demand greater transparency and responsibility. Cumulatively, organizations have a responsibility for activities that have undermined the environmental systems that provide the resources on which they depend. However current economic systems do not yet include the fundamental adaptations needed to create the sustainable society that concerned organizations are aiming for. The available good practice guidance for organizations is lacking a full-systems sustainability perspective and does not challenge the dominant way of doing business. This omission leads to reductionist approaches that allow the ongoing depletion of non-renewable resources, generate pollution and waste, decrease biodiversity, impact the social wellbeing and ultimately increasing risk, cost and uncertainty for organizations by generating counterproductive outcomes to their own success in the long term.

Traditional organizational Social Responsibility (SR) practices have primarily been reactive and focused on social stakeholder issues. They have lacked sufficient attention to the ecological impacts of global business practices and concern is growing that current organizational SR initiatives may therefore lack a critical whole systems perspective and concepts necessary to effectively tackle the global sustainability crisis.

International efforts are underway to build censuses on SR guidelines yet evidence suggests that although guidelines are set they are only making marginal improvements. If organizational SR guidelines look to establish a global benchmark of what is considered acceptable, they must be clear, robust and reflect the most advanced understanding of how organizational, social and ecological systems are inter-related and dependent. Only then can SR guidelines effectively provide strategic value, whilst helping to avoid the undermining of the social and environmental systems that the organization itself relies on.

Organizations are now at a point where they can decide to follow the current 'business as usual' model or recognize the opportunity to take the essential steps that will move them forward to a sustainable economic, social and environmental future. This paper reviews current literature and expert opinions relating to the application of a science-based strategic sustainable development planning framework that can assist organizations in understanding how to respond positively to the global sustainability challenge.

The analysis and recommendations of this research are essential in assisting decision-makers in strategically applying SR guidelines. Having SR implemented at a strategic level implies that it is a critical business decision that effects the whole organization. Therefore if SR and Sustainable Development (SD) are inherently connected, this also implies that the

introduction of sustainability based principles should underpin strategy level decision-making in all organizations.

### ***Background on organizational Social Responsibility***

The simple concept of Social Responsibility is that organizations should have obligations that are not solely focused in making profit; instead there are broader social and environmental considerations that need to be measured (Godfrey and Hatch, 2006). Until recently, SR engagement has been informal and not necessarily aligned strongly with organizational strategy and financial performance (Lee et al, 2008). A recent realignment has come from a number of catalysts that have been identified through the growth in stakeholder interest, academic research and corporate engagement in SR.

The authors did not focus solely on the more common term of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but recognized that all organizations in a society, not just corporations, need to be responsible and therefore choose to use the more inclusive term organizational Social Responsibility (SR).

### ***Strategic Sustainable Development***

This research applies key concepts, definitions and principles from the framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) (Holmberg and Robèrt, 2000; Ny, 2006) to assess how sustainability concepts might be integrated into a more complete definition of SR and to understand the increasing impacts society has made on the biosphere. The SSD approach provides a strategic framework and a rigorous definition of a sustainable society to build consensus in organizational planning. The SSD systems-thinking approach provides structure and can complement other SR and SD methods, actions and tools (Robèrt et al, 2002).

Many of the concepts outlined in SSD have successfully been applied as part of an organizational sustainability strategic planning framework, in an effort to proactively assist organizations in the movement towards a Sustainable Society (Natrass and Altomare, 1999, p.43). SSD is in the public domain as a peer-reviewed research framework and is currently in use by many organizations and research departments. Many of the key concepts of SSD have been developed, applied and promoted at an organizational and community level through the NGO - The Natural Step International.

**The 6 Core Concepts within Strategic Sustainable Development are:**

**1. SSD – Take a broad systems perspective.** Human society exists within the complex system of the Earth’s biosphere. Individuals in society also exist within the environmental system and distribute and discharge various natural resources and wastes. Organizations as groups of individuals, and as part of society, are also understood to be within the biosphere. It is vital for all levels of the system to understand this wide interrelationship when making decisions.

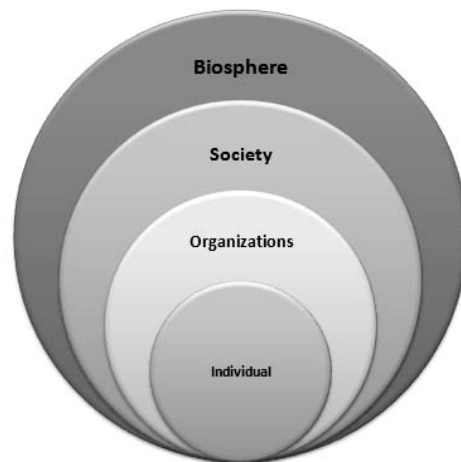


Figure 1 *Nested Systems within the Biosphere*

**2. SSD – Backcasting Towards Success.** In SSD, ‘backcasting’ (Dreborg, 1996; Holmberg and Robért, 2000; Robinson, 2003) is a method in which the future desired conditions are envisioned

and then steps are taken to attain that vision, rather than taking steps that are based on limited current trends for the future (forecasting).

**3. SSD – *Moving Towards a Sustainable Society.*** The ultimate goal of SSD is to help move towards a Sustainable Society within the biosphere. For this to be implemented, the ultimate goal for all of society must be to achieve a healthy sustainable society within the biosphere. Effective organizational decisions that seek to be socially responsible therefore must also look to take steps in the right direction by contributing to the movement towards a sustainable society (Robèrt et al., 2007). Each individual organization can describe its own goals with the constraints of the sustainable society as ‘not contributing to violating the overall conditions for sustainability’, and then develop a desired future vision for the organization within those constraints (Waldron et al., 2006).

**4. SSD – *Prioritizing Actions Strategically.*** Three core questions can then assist in effectively prioritizing strategic management decisions and actions particularly when backcasting from a success point:

- I. *Is this a step in the right direction towards the desired goal?*
- II. *Is this a flexible platform for future ideas and innovations?*
- III. *Will this provide a positive financial and/or social return?*

Organizations can add further prioritizing questions such as urgency, time, and funding, to supplement strategic decisions as required.

**5. SSD – *Using a Structured Approach.*** The generic ‘Five Level Framework’ for strategic planning and its application to sustainability as the ‘Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development’ (FSSD) provides a systematic method for organizing, evaluating, and relating information and concepts (Holmberg and Robèrt; 2000; Robèrt, 2000).

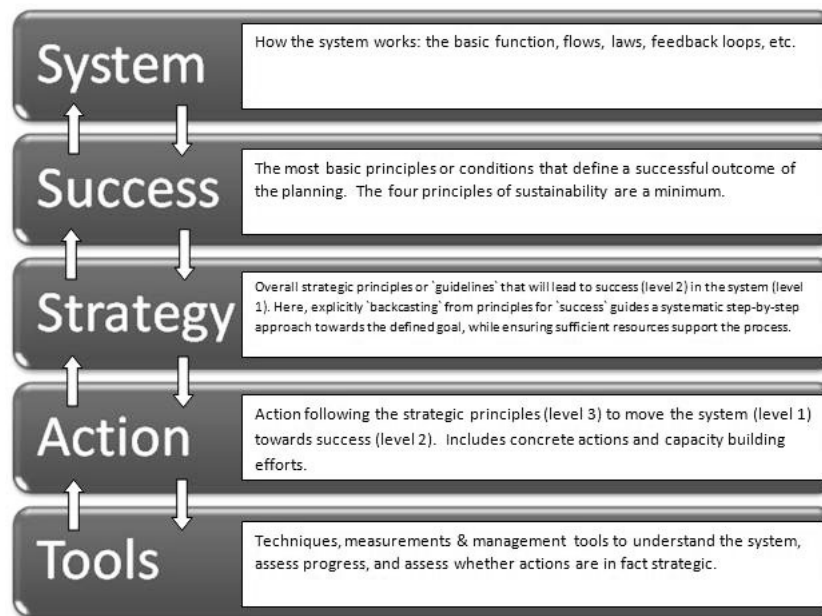


Figure 2 *The Five Level Framework for Strategic Planning*

When the System Level of the Five Level Framework is defined as 'society in the biosphere' and paired with a clear Success Level of a Sustainable Society, the framework becomes a powerful tool for organizational planning known as the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). The FSSD has been peer-reviewed in the scientific community and has been shown effective in complex strategic planning as it is designed to: (a) reveal the gap between current reality and a fully sustainable state, and (b) discover the opportunities to bridge that gap in the best way (Waldron et al., 2006; Robért et al., 2004; Bitterman, Lopez and Wright ,2007).

**6. SSD – Principles for a Sustainable Society.** There are four scientific principles for sustainability that compromise the basic constraints of the 'Success Level' in the FSSD. All four principles have to be met in a truly Sustainable Society (Holmberg, Robért and Eriksson, 1996;

Ny et al., 2006). The first three principles are related to the environmental systems and the fourth is relating to the social systems.

*In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...*

*I. Concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust*

*II. Concentrations of substances produced by society*

*III. Degradation by physical means*

*and in the society...*

*IV. People are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.*

These 'SSD Sustainability Principles' are a tremendous challenge and cannot be met easily in the current economic system. However, they are not always meant to be used as prescriptive rules; rather, they are intended as a tool to help an organization envision a future towards which to orient its strategic actions. In this way they act as a compass, helping a company avoid decisions that will have negative environmental consequences and therefore undermine the viability of all organization and society in the long-term.

### ***Research Questions***

This research sought to clarify the overall goals of SR, find common ground for decision makers through SD and outline critical concepts of sustainability that may assist SR guidelines in reaching their goals.

#### **Research Question #1**

*How are the concepts of organizational Social Responsibility (SR) and Sustainable Development (SD) related? - Do they share a common goal of moving towards a Sustainable Society?*

## **Research Question #2**

*If SR and SD share an overall goal to assist organizations in moving towards a 'Sustainable Society':*

- Is it critical for SR Guidelines to integrate sustainability concepts and principles to be effective in moving towards this goal?*
- What specific Strategic Sustainable Development (SSD) concepts could be integrated into SR Guidelines to assist organizations in moving towards this goal?*

### ***Background on the Case Study: ISO 26000 SR***

In 2001 the International Standards Organization began the development process of a Social Responsibility guideline (ISO, 2007). They looked to help clearly define SR, what it means to the organization and what they need to consider when incorporating improvements (ISO, 2004). Key core subjects in the document include:

- Organizational Governance
- Human Rights
- Labor Practices
- The Environment
- Fair Operating Practices
- Consumer Issues
- Contributions to the Community and Society

Recognizing the need for international consensus, ISO 26000 seeks to have representative contributing organizations from a wide range of both developed and developing nations.

Standards organizations from Brazil and Sweden were assigned the roles of coordinating and completing the consultation and development of the document (ISO, 2006).

The Swedish Standards Institute (SIS) and the Swedish ISO 26000 Mirror Group (SMG), whilst reviewing the 3rd Working Draft of the guidelines, considered that the document could benefit from a deeper analysis of Sustainable Development and contacted the authors.

In partnership with the SMG the authors used the ISO 26000 WD 3 and 4 as their primary case study based on its current standing in the international SR community and information accessibility.

## **Methods**

The research was based on five main sources of information:

1. A literature review on organizational SR, guidelines, standards and sustainability including a thorough review of the ISO 26000 guidance development process.
2. Meetings and discussions with members of both the Swedish Standards Institute (SIS) and the ISO 26000 Swedish Mirror Group (SMG). Their insight on the practical application of the authors' findings and on standards and guideline development processes was invaluable.
3. The SMG was also the base for the third source of information. An online survey was sent to all of the member organizations of the SMG and was both a source of critical information and for consensus building towards the authors later recommendations.
4. Two further on-line surveys and interviews were also used. Survey 4a was focused on 'SR Experts' and academics, where as Survey 4b was sent out through online communities and polled 'SR Networks' of practitioners and consultants. The goal of these interactions was to test the author's findings to date, not simply with fellow sustainability researchers, but to challenge their hypothesis by polling SR experts and practitioners.

5. Lastly, the authors applied their initial findings to a case study/gap analysis of the working draft 3 and 4 of the ISO 26000. The findings and a set of recommendations were presented to the SMG in June 2008 (available for review in Dewangga, Goldsmith, & Pegram, 2008).



Figure 3 *Stages of Research*

### ***Limitations of this Research***

The boundaries and limitations set by the authors excluded from the research concerns and questions on specific SR areas such as labor standards or human rights issues. In addition, very detailed and specific application, or implementation considerations were only briefly discussed. Finally, the breakdown and applicability of SSD Sustainability Principle #4, although of great interest to the authors, was not researched due to time constraints. However, the authors feel that it is critical for future research to consider if organizational SR guidelines based on the concepts of human needs, rather than on prescriptive and overlapping best-practice guidance, may be a more effective strategy for addressing the root causes and challenges of SR in the long-term.

Although attempts were made to explicitly ask questions that might ‘disprove’ the authors’ hypotheses by seeking input directly from the SR field, the research was based on the existing SSD framework as applied by the BTH MSLS research unit.

## **Results**

This results section includes research findings from literature reviews, interviews, meetings, and surveys. The following section is only a very brief summary of the key results of the research. The complete results and appendixes of all data collection and recommendations can be found in the full thesis published through the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden (Dewangga, Goldsmith, & Pegram, 2008).

### ***Results of Method 1: Literature Review***

Over the past 10 years much has been published assessing the role that SR plays in organizational, social and environmental spheres. Interest comes from many different academic disciplines recognizing the multiple influences and outcomes that SR contributes. Academic research on SR has increasingly been supplemented by business publications, which although not peer reviewed, can give current insights into trends, priorities and actions. This research reviewed over 140 publications and information sources.

One challenge with organizational SR is the lack of one universally agreed definition (WBSCD 2000 in van Marrewijk, 2003). A recent analysis of over 37 SR definitions found they varied significantly in focus (Dahlsrud, 2002). A term with so many meanings lead Vothaw and Sethi to state that SR as a concept “means something, but not always the same thing to everybody” (in van Marrewijk, 2003, p.96).

The literature review showed that definitions and activities related to SR have a tendency to focus more on social issues. Esty (in Dyllick, 2002) and Gobbels (in van Marrewijk, 2003) both suggested that often, the social agenda is the primary focus when compared to the environment in Triple Bottom Line (TBL) based approaches. Some academics even simply define SR as the social dimension of SD (Ebner and Baumgartner, 2006).

Only a small number of publications were identified that recognized that the economic viability of organizations is founded on the requirement to sustain environmental and social systems or the “natural case for corporate sustainability” (Dyllick, 2002, p.135) (Gladwin et al, 1995, Ebner and Baumgartner, 2006). Economies can survive in the short term without recognizing this, however, over the long term their viability diminishes. Such an understanding is defined as a “principle of communion” whereby organizations have to be responsible for their impacts, “without conforming to this principle then organizations ultimately risk extinction” (van Marrewijk, 2003, p.103). Payne and Raiborn, (2001) suggest that without SD “neither business nor the societies in which they exist will have a long term future” (in Ebner and Baumgartner, 2006, 6). Senge (in Dyllick, 2002) recognizes that incremental environmental improvement is insufficient from a SD perspective, where efficiencies are being outstripped by productivity growth.

Linnanen & Panapanaan (in van Marrewijk, 2003) suggest that corporate sustainability should be the ultimate goal following the Brundtland definition. Erasmus University has also placed SD as the ultimate goal, with organizational SR as an intermediate stage where companies try to balance the TBL (in van Marrewijk, 2003).

### ***Results of Method 3: ISO 26000 Swedish Mirror Group On-line Survey***

An 8 question online survey was sent to the 45 SMG members, 19 responses were received. The aim was to capture the understanding and views relating to SR issues, their relationship to sustainability and also how this would relate to the ISO 26000 guidance.

All 7 ‘Organizational sectors’ as categorized by the SMG were represented with the majority representing Industry (32%) and Government (21%). Labour, NGO’s, Service, Support

& Research and 'Others' all had a 10% representation. Consumer organizations represented only 5%. 'Others' included 2 consulting organizations and 1 national standards body.

90% of the surveyed SMG agreed 'that individuals, organizations and society exist within and depend on the environment?' 5% were unsure and 5% disagreed. A supplementary question 'Should major organizational decisions (including 'social responsibility' decisions) therefore also consider environmental impacts?' generated strong agreement by 14 of the 19 respondents, however, some qualified their answers for example where urgent responses to key issues (e.g. human rights abuses) had to override this position.

In a matrix of questions, respondents were asked to rate the importance of a series of components as assisting guidelines in reaching their aims. 'Clear goals and/or success points' was the most highly rated answer overall. Further, 68% of respondents agreed that 'clearly stating a goal or a success point in a social responsibility guideline' would 'increase its effectiveness in identifying a course of action for organizations'.

79% of the respondents answered that 'the ultimate goal of SR is to assist organizations in moving towards a sustainable society'. 16% were unsure. If respondents disagreed with this position they were asked 'what they thought was the ultimate goal of SR'. Respondents showed some variance in their interpretation of what a sustainable society is and how it is defined; one considered that the "goal is to move towards a sustainable organization", another stated "A sustainable, responsible business is a prerequisite for a sustainable society".

#### ***Results of Method 4a: SR Experts Survey***

To better understand the organizational SR perspective and how it relates to SD, the authors sought input from various SR Experts and researchers. The authors felt that if their results aligned with both the SD and SR communities, their findings and recommendations had a

greater likelihood of being successful in assisting all decision-makers in moving organizations towards sustainability.

An 8 question online survey was primarily sent to academics publishing in the SR community; however other professionals such as SR consultants and NGO representatives involved with SR policy development were also identified. 14 full responses of 33 were received.

64% considered the diagram (Fig. 4) integral in their understanding of 'how organizations and society operate within, and depend on the environment and how the scopes of socially responsible decisions need to consider all 3 areas'. 29% disagreed and 7% were unsure.

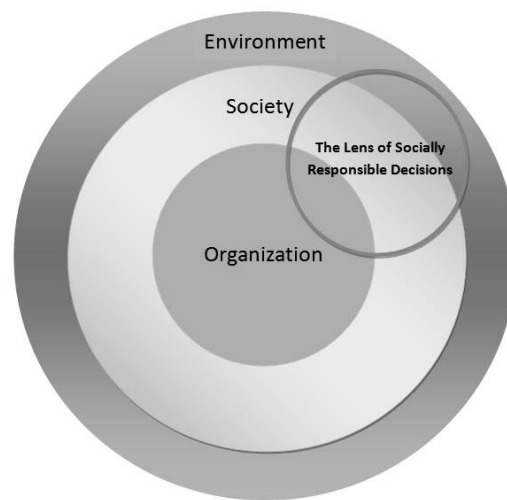


Figure 4 *Scope of Socially Responsible Decision*

A follow-up question; 'Should Organizational SR guidelines acknowledge these inter-relationships in order to provide guidance on how organizational decisions need to consider all 3 areas had a 64% agreement. Supporting comments included; "such a view is not widely recognized because of a lack of environmental awareness" and that "the organization is impacted by SR from external stakeholders rather than internal drivers".

The question ‘In your opinion, what is the relationship between Sustainable Development and Organizational Social Responsibility?’ resulted in 5 of 14 stating that SR is the organizational means to achieve SD, which is the ultimate objective or goal. One respondent suggested, contrary to other findings, that: “although intimately linked, that SD is only one element of SR”. One respondent compared SR to SD stating that it “challenged the ‘soft option’ business as usual business model by seeking transformational change”, and another stated “a historical merging over time”.

85% of SR Experts surveyed broadly agreed with the statement that ‘the ultimate goal of Organizational SR is to assist organizations in moving towards a sustainable society’. The authors found that if the question was clear on the principled definition of a ‘sustainable society’ and what it meant with reference to constraints and human needs, respondents would tend to agree directly with the statement.

57% agreed with the statement that ‘Organizational SR policies and guidelines such as ‘SR policies’, will ‘eventually become part of overall Organizational Sustainability policies and guidelines’. Reasoning against the statement included; “businesses will fight against this” and that “the two concepts are the same so simply a matter of semantics”. Interestingly though, of those that stated that they did not agree with the statement, most answers simply stated how it would be difficult in the short term rather than looking it a real vision of the long term.

Relevant further comments included “the ambiguity of SR” and that “it is often used as a gimmick to increase reputation and profit rather than sustainability”.

### ***Results Method 4b: SR Networks Survey***

The authors’ also sent a revised 8 question online survey to multiple international SR Networks of practitioners. The demographic of the 20 complete responses showed the following

professional experience in either SR or SD: 15% (1-2 years), 60% (3-5 years), 5% (6-9 years) and 20% (10+ years).

The survey presented a detailed outline of the authors' definition of a 'sustainable society' based on a set of 4 minimum principles. The results were clear with 85% of respondents agreeing that the principle based definition aligned with their ideas "on the fundamental requirements necessary to create a Sustainable Society in the long-term". There were numerous supporting comments from the respondents agreeing with the link between environmental degradation and the ability of people to meet their needs and that social issues should not be an afterthought in discussions of sustainability. The authors acknowledged a comment that "...there should be at least as many social principles as environmental" and they are aware of research underway to address this.

90% of respondents agreed that "Sustainable Development and Organizational Social Responsibility share an ultimate overall goal of moving towards a Sustainable Society." This finding was directly inline with the results from both the SMG and the SR Experts.

70% of the respondents agreed that the concepts of SD were historically developed from the environmental perspective, whereas organizational SR has historically been developed from a corporate sector perspective, with 25% unsure. Concerns were made that the statement was an 'oversimplification' and 'the roles of other organizations such as government and NGOs were not clear in the statement'.

The following two diagrams (Figure 5) were presented in the survey in an effort to help explain the authors' early findings, along with a statement that the diagram on the right acknowledges that:

1. Organizations and society are within the environment

2. That all major strategic decisions need to consider their impacts on the organization, the society and the environment.
3. That the long term ultimate goal of socially responsible organizations is to take steps in the right direction towards a Sustainable Society.

85% of respondents felt that organizational SR needed to “acknowledge these 3 concepts if it seeks to be effective in assisting organization in moving towards an environmentally and socially sustainable society”.

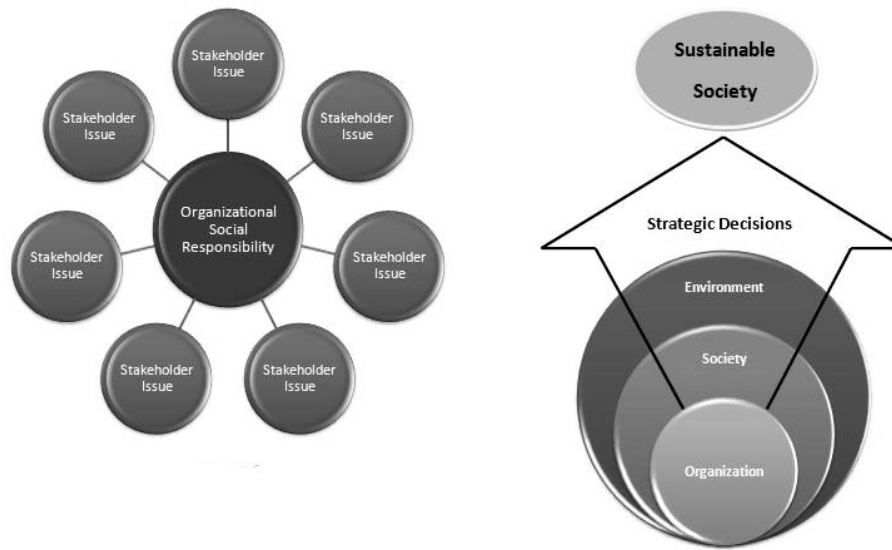


Figure 5 Survey Question- Example of Initial Findings

However only 55% felt that the actual diagram clearly represents these 3 concepts with some respondents suggesting the term “environment” was too ambiguous.

Finally, 85% of respondents agreed that Organizational SR guidelines will eventually become part of overall “Organizational Sustainability guidelines” with only one response in clear disagreement and 10% unsure. When these results were analyzed, the broad comments showed that many organizations are already aligning CSR with SD goals.

## Discussion

*“CSR describes the SD path for the organization. In the longer run, and if all sectors of society, private, public and civil create a new paradigm based on SD, CSR guidelines will be absorbed into organizational guidelines – CSR will have fulfilled its role when it becomes obsolete.” – SR Expert*

### ***Defining SD and SR***

When defining the concepts of Sustainable Development it is critical to note that the term is not ‘Sustainable Growth’. “Growth gets bigger, development it gets different. The economy must at some point stop growing, but it can continue to develop” (Des Jardin, 1998, p.832). It is possible for development of society to continue even with decreasing resource consumption. For instance, development of society can be seen in increased literacy and human rights which are not directly tied to the need to increase resource use. It is important to note that the sustainability of society is a fundamentally different concept than the sustainability or ongoing viability of an individual organization. A sustainable society depends on its ability to meet the needs of the present without systematically undermining the needs of future generations. A Sustainable Society is accomplished through Sustainable Development whereby social systems function and develop within the ecological constraints of the planet.

The literature showed that the environment as an issue within Social Responsibility has traditionally been underrepresented and is often seen as separate from the organizations rather than being completely interrelated and of crucial importance to the long-term viability or organizations. Of the 71 SR publications reviewed only 5 (Des Jardin, 1998; DeSimone & Popoff, 1997; van Marrewijk, 2003; Ebner and Baumgartner, 2006; Dyllick, 2002) clearly recognized this interrelationship.

As anticipated, there is still some debate in the literature as to whether SR should focus solely on social issues; however, the authors found that both environmental and social components must be considered together if we are looking towards a sustainable future. Even decisions that appear to only be relevant on a social level often have undermining effects on the environment and therefore in turn on the viability of organizations resources in the long term. Without a full-systems (environmental and social) understanding of sustainability, practitioners are unable to assess if their strategic actions are negatively impacting the other system.

Although the authors found that Sustainable Development is relatively consistently defined in most literature (as the Brundtland Commission definition (WCED, 1987)), there is a lack of agreement of how to achieve it and ideas on implementation of SD at an organizational level are relatively new. The authors recommend a principle-based scientific definition of a Sustainable Society to build consensus between SR and SD through a shared goal based on an understanding of planetary constraints.

### ***Are SR and SD related & do they share a common goal of a Sustainable Society?***

*"Sustainability comes historically from the environmental side, CSR from the social side, but today it seems that both merge"- SR Expert*

It is important to understand how SR and SD have historically developed and that they are now converging. The results show that the concept of Sustainable Development was historically developed from the environmental research sector perspective and was based primarily on global environmental and social concerns.

In opposition, Social Responsibility has historically been developed from an internal corporate/organizational perspective and has been a reactive response based on external stakeholder driven pressure. Organizations only recently started looking out from internal issues

towards social and environmental concerns, while the SD community, looking from the opposite side of the spectrum, has only recently started to consider how environmental and social concerns might relate to organizational strategy.

When this finding is combined with the finding that the ultimate goal of SR is to assist organizations in moving towards a sustainable society, it becomes very significant, as it identifies a commonality between SR and SD and then sets the task as defining what constitutes a Sustainable Society. Yet few SR Experts surveyed were aware that scientifically rigorous principles outlining the requirements for a Sustainable Society already existed.

*"Rather than agreeing on detailed descriptions of a desirable distant future, it is easier to (i) agree on basic principles for success, (ii) agree on initial concrete steps that can serve as flexible stepping-stones in the right direction, and (iii) continuously re-evaluate transitions along the way."*  
(Robert et al., 2004, p.xix)

### ***Organizational sustainable development planning frameworks***

The majority of both SR and SD experts and academics surveyed, agreed that "Organizational Social Responsibility guidelines such as "CSR guidelines", will eventually become part of overall Organizational Sustainability guidelines." The authors found that organizational SR would benefit from integrating key SD concepts, to ensure that there is a counterbalance to its current socially focused position, and to reach its aim of a sustainable society. This hybrid version of SR, organizational sustainable development planning, describes the process of moving towards meeting scientific sustainability constraints and provides a more complete understanding of the organizations impact on their surroundings. It is a type of strategic planning that utilizes a full systems perspective to understand the complex interrelationships between both social and environmental issues.

Organizational sustainability planning can critically focus on proactive long-term strategy, rather than simply being reactive as short-term stakeholder compliance. Organizations can identify their most critical sustainability challenges proactively and then identify the key stakeholders that can assist them, without necessarily prioritizing issues based solely on stakeholder influences. Since environmental issues are inherently underrepresented in society and organizations, basing SR policies simply on stakeholder pressure can never be a fully effective strategy towards sustainability.

A shift to organizational sustainability planning also begins the process of challenging the current economic model that rewards unsustainable behavior. Most resources, for example, cannot be sustainably consumed at the current rate, yet there is an increasing financial incentive for organizations to extract them as they become scarcer. To ensure that organizations remain viable into the future, the economic model needs to be modified.

In an ideal situation the authors find that SR programs should eventually become transformed into full organizational sustainable development planning frameworks that proactively and effectively assist organizations in moving towards a sustainable society.

### ***Can SR guidelines integrate SD concepts towards success?***

Once a common link and clearer definitions of SR and SD were established, the authors felt it was critical to understand what Strategic Sustainable Development concepts could be integrated into SR guidelines to assist them in moving towards their goals.

SR guidelines look to set the global standard operating practices for organizations. It is therefore critical for SR guidelines to integrate sustainability concepts and principles if they seek to be effective in reaching their stated aims of contributing to SD. The framework and concepts of Strategic Sustainable Development have been effectively applied in Organizational

Sustainability planning and the authors believe it can assist current SR guidelines in reaching their aims.

Through the case study review and discussions it became apparent that a number of critical aspects of SSD were not covered in ISO 26000. Although ISO 26000 is a very thorough document that does an exceptional job of communicating the complex issues of SR, the authors and some SMG members felt it lacked an overall understanding of sustainability concepts. The following list is a very simplified review of the authors' initial gap analysis between six key concepts of SSD and the current working draft of ISO 26000:

1. ***Taking a whole systems perspective:*** Although the "Environment" section covers the majority of ecological sustainability issues, the guideline lacked a clear and consistent understanding of how organizations and society are within the environment.
2. ***Moving towards a 'Sustainable Society':*** The definition of SR states that its "...aim is to contribute to sustainable development..." However, the document as a whole does not highlight this aim, clearly define a 'sustainable society' or explicitly state it as an overall success point or goal.
3. ***Backcasting:*** Neither the concept of backcasting as a strategic tool nor a clearly defined strategic planning tool that assists in developing strategy actions based on visionary success principles is identified.
4. ***Prioritizing actions strategically:*** Although many actions are recommended, limited information is given as to tools or techniques to prioritize between actions or decisions, particularly in dealing with challenging trade off situations.
5. ***Using a structured approach:*** Although the outline and format of the working draft was still being developed, the authors felt it lacked an overall framework that could assist the user in

developing effective strategic planning because it did not clearly state a success point for strategies and actions to move towards.

6. ***Principles for a Sustainable Society:*** SD is defined using Brundtland's definition which is limited and gives little guidance to users. Further, the conditions for reaching a successful sustainable society are not outlined as part of principle-based goal setting.

Once this initial case study review was complete the authors then considered the potential impact of these gaps on generic SR guidelines' effectiveness in moving towards their stated goals. The authors found three primary critical SD related concepts that any organizational Social Responsibility Guideline need to include being effective in moving towards a goal of a sustainable society:

1. Explicitly outline a clear and consistent understanding of how organizations and society are within and depend upon the environment. This seeks to ensure that socio-ecological issues are addressed in an integrated manner.
2. Clearly state overall goals for organizations to backcast towards. To fully comprehend SD and SR issues, the aim and concept of a 'Sustainable Society' needs to be addressed so organizations have an overall goal that they are moving towards.
3. Scientific, principle-based definitions of critical concepts of SD and a sustainable society, to improve communication, consensus-building and strategic goal setting in SR.

## **Conclusion**

This research sought to understand the relationships and goals of organizational SR and SD and how sustainability concepts might assist organizational SR guidelines. The authors conclude that the concepts of organizational Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development are fundamentally related. Organizational Social Responsibility comes from the perspective of

organizations and has an ultimate goal to assist those organizations in moving towards a sustainable society. Traditionally, SR was developed as a reaction to stakeholder driven issues and has primarily been focused on how societal concerns will impact the organization.

Sustainable Development is development that moves towards both an environmentally and socially sustainable society and is based on the ecological constraints of the planet and global social issues. SD proactively looks at whole-systems issues and has only recently been applied at an organizational level as strategic sustainability planning. Fundamentally SR and SD have a shared common goal of a sustainable society which can become the critical bridge that can build communication and understanding between the two perspectives.

The challenges of creating a sustainable society require proactive decision making based on sustainability constraints rather than reactive stakeholder driven actions. Organizations need to recognize that social and environmental issues are interlinked and that the sustainable society challenge requires strategic decisions based on a long-term systems thinking perspective. The greatest challenge to SR may be adapting the current economic model that rewards unsustainable behavior yet needs to be modified to ensure that organizations remain viable into the future.

Organizational SR guidelines look to set the standard operating practices for organizations. The sustainable society challenge is based on both ecological and social constraints and requires an understanding of SD concepts to be solved. It is therefore critical for SR guidelines to integrate Sustainable Development concepts and principles if they seek to be effective in moving towards their stated goal of a sustainable society.

The framework and concepts of Strategic Sustainable Development have been effectively applied in strategic organizational Sustainability planning. The authors' case study analysis

identified three fundamental SSD concepts that could be integrated into any organizational SR Guidelines to assist them in moving towards their goals:

1. Acknowledgement that organizations are within and depend on the environment for their long-term viability to effectively address both social and environmental sustainability issues.
2. A systems-thinking and proactive strategic framework that can backcast from the clear success point of a sustainable society.
3. A set of non-overlapping science-based principle definitions of a sustainable society, to build consensus between organizations on the ultimate goal and success point outline in the guideline.

The authors believe that this research will assist decision-makers in clarifying the challenges of moving organizations towards a sustainable society through a deeper understanding of SD and SR and through the application of SD concepts to organizational SR guidelines. A sustainable society where we balance our needs with those of the next generation and the rest of the planet, should be the current goal for our whole society not just organizations. The majority of organizations must commit to a shared understanding of this common goal or it is unlikely to become attainable considering the current state of our planet.

If SR guidelines reflect the reality of sustainability constraints, social needs and the ability for organizations to generate profit, they can provide a blueprint to help organizations move towards a sustainable future. This will require the recognition by those developing SR guidelines that without a full sustainability perspective, SR will be ineffective in reaching its aims in the long-term. Without a shift in SR practices; environmental impacts, resource scarcity and the potential for conflict because of these impacts will in the long-term undermine organizational and societal systems. Organizational decision-makers have a pressing choice: to

ignore their true responsibility and continue to reactively respond to stakeholders with minimum effort or to proactively assess the long-term risks and viability of their business and to take on the positive challenge of assisting society in creating a sustainable future.

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**Neil Pegram** is a Canadian Sustainability Consultant specializing in facilitation, stakeholder engagement, research and organizational strategic planning. His past research experience has primarily focused on psychology but he more recently shifted to the private sector where he has consulted in a range of industries including CSR, Human Resources, Recruitment and Public Relations. Neil holds a BSc in Biology/Psychology from the University of Victoria and a Masters Degree in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability.

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**Simon Goldsmith** has combined his 14 years of working in the environmental sector with his interest in learning from sustainability leaders and academics and applying this knowledge to develop solutions to critical challenges. For 8 years he was Director of the London Environment Centre and a key consultee on governmental and non-governmental boards which have promoted sustainability within the London region, the UK and internationally. Simon holds a BA (Hons), an MSc Rural Resources & Environmental Policy, and Masters degree in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability.

**Anastasia Dewangga** holds a BCom in Entrepreneurship from Royal Roads University, a diploma in Marketing Management and Masters Degree in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability. Her interest lies in the development of corporate sustainability. She is infatuated with the marketing field and aspires to integrate this into the sustainability framework by focusing into deeper studies through a second Masters degree in Brand Management at Lund University.

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