

Statement of the International Labour Office on ISO/TS/P 289

The International Labour Office (ILO) directs this communication to the ISO Technical Management Board (ISO/TMB) and national standards bodies (NSBs) to recommend that they decline ISO/TS/P 289, the proposal for a new field of technical activity in social responsibility put forward by the Association française de normalisation (AFNOR). The proposal is comprised of the following:

- Revision of ISO 26000:2010
- Development of one or more implementation guidelines or standards to support the integration of social responsibility in all types of organizations
- Development of guidelines or standards on specific social responsibility issues

The ILO recognizes the contribution of ISO 26000 on Social Responsibility. ISO 26000 provides a comprehensive overview of the existing international instruments on social responsibility and gives useful guidance on how the principles contained in these instruments can be implemented in organizations of all sizes and ownership structures, as well as across sectors. The International Labour Office contributed extensively to the drafting of the text and encouraged national standards bodies to vote in favour of its adoption.¹ Many national governments, the International Organization of Employers (IOE) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) also dedicated significant time and resources to its development.

The credibility of ISO 26000 stems from the fact that the content is almost entirely based on authoritative international instruments and frameworks that were developed through representative processes. The current text aligns fully with international labour standards and the ILO *Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy*, as well as the other major international guiding instruments in the field of social responsibility, including the *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* and the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*. The revision of the text and development of additional guidelines risks upending the existing global consensus achieved in the ISO 26000 process. Furthermore, unnecessary changes and additions will likely introduce inconsistencies with other instruments as well as country-level regulatory and policy frameworks such as National Action Plans on business and human rights, confusing both public and private actors.

Additionally, the proposal to develop an “ISO 26000 series”, if accepted, is expected to follow the regular ISO committee model of establishing a Project Committee (PC), which does not permit effective participation of representative organizations. Under the operating rules, only ISO NSBs can be TC or PC members, thus excluding full and equal representation and participation of the wide range of stakeholders in fields covered under SR that are vital to the legitimacy of instruments and guidance in this area. Liaison organizations representing non-ISO stakeholders would be excluded from decision-making power since only Committee members can vote in the Committee and in formal ISO voting processes on Draft versions of standards. ISO 26000:2010 tried to overcome this challenge with a hybrid approach that asked each NSB to appoint experts from six stakeholder groups. While that approach expanded participation beyond the traditional ISO expert model, it was a half measure since it still left control with the NSBs and was applied very unevenly from country to country: some NSBs allowed each stakeholder group to elect their own representative, but others simply assigned experts to stakeholder groups whether they truly represented that group or not.. Without the ability of stakeholder groups to elect their own representatives and the participation of representative organizations in a revision and/or development of supplemental guidelines, the legitimacy of any standards or guidelines

¹ The ILO participated in the drafting of ISO 26000 in the multi-stakeholder working group established directly under the TMB (WGSR). ILO participated not as a liaison organization but with a status defined by the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding between the ILO and the ISO in the field of social responsibility.

will be undermined and their validity eroded. This would contradict the recommendation of the multi-stakeholder ISO 26000 Post Publication Organization (PPO) that any revision process be undertaken only with the “balanced stakeholder engagement... that characterized the development of ISO 26000:2010”.

In conclusion, the credibility of ISO 26000 is based on the fact that it is aligned with ~~the objectives of~~ existing international labour standards and instruments developed through representative processes. As a result, there are grounds for concern that any new ISO instruments on SR produced through ISO’s expert-based (vs. representative) committees may diverge from the content and objectives of those authoritative standards and instruments. The resulting negative impact on progress toward decent work and sustainable development constitutes the type of “impacts of its decisions and activities” for which organizations are expected to be socially responsible under ISO 26000:2010. The ILO therefore recommends that NSBs and the ISO/TMB decline ISO/TS/P 289.

Geneva, 4 May 2020