

An introduction to
comparing and benchmarking
sustainability standards systems





How can you make sure you choose sustainability standards that deliver positive impact?

Over the past twenty years, hundreds of standards and certification schemes have developed with different purposes and addressing different sustainability issues. They add value by helping companies achieve their sustainability goals and objectives.

Key questions

Which standards work best to meet my sustainability objectives?

How can I best evaluate and compare standards?

How do I know which sustainability standards are going to help deliver sustainable outcomes?

How do I know which labels and claims are credible?

They do this by providing a roadmap for putting sustainability into practice, by helping to protect and enhance a company's reputation, and by helping company's achieve their sustainability goals and objectives.

However, this growth in the number of standards has also caused confusion and raised a number of questions for users and potential users of sustainability standards, resulting in a growing number of companies and multi-stakeholder initiatives developing criteria to benchmark or compare standards systems.

ISEAL has produced this introductory guide to help companies, benchmarking initiatives and individuals evaluate and compare sustainability standards and understand what's important to make informed decisions about which standards systems to use.



Dimexon Diamonds workforce, Coimbatore, India © Responsible Jewellery Council

What elements really matter when comparing and benchmarking sustainability standards systems?

Sustainability standards are often compared and evaluated against the ambition of their content (for example, prevention of child labour or habitat conservation).

But with different purposes and sustainability focuses, comparing these standards can be challenging and even misleading. It can also take time to see evidence of how standards are delivering positive impacts.

Importantly, knowing how a standards system is structured (for example, its assurance, traceability and standard-setting practices) as well as how credibly these are implemented gives a strong indication of whether the sustainability standard is likely to deliver on its social and environmental goals.

Building on ISEAL's understanding of good practices for standards systems through our Codes of Good Practices and Credibility Principles, ISEAL has compiled a list of critical elements to ensure that comparisons and benchmarking between standards systems are credible and take account of elements that are important to the effective functioning of a standards system.

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Critical elements of credible standards

1 Scheme management

It is important that there are key management practices in place to make sure the scheme has a clear sustainability vision, is clear on its strategy and impacts, and has a strong governance structure in place.

Stakeholders need to have meaningful opportunities to engage and participate in, or provide formal input on the governance of the scheme.

Standard schemes need to demonstrate progress towards outcomes, accurately and publicly communicate the results, and use the learning to improve their standard and supporting strategies.

Standards systems ensure claims and communications are accurate, verifiable and enable an informed choice.

Key questions

How can I ensure that the sustainability standard is being managed appropriately?

Which sustainability standard can help best maintain my licence to operate?

How do I know what sustainability impacts the scheme is achieving?

2 Standard-setting

Being rigorous and transparent about the standard-setting process, including how the standard is developed and revised is critical. Information needs to be made publicly available on standards development, revision processes and on decision-making.

The standard needs to be reviewed and revised on a regular basis (not exceeding five years).

Input received during consultation needs to be documented and a public report produced on how issues raised are addressed.

There should also be provision or mechanisms in place to ensure that the standard is locally applicable in the regions where it is applied, and that criteria in the standard contribute to addressing the key sustainability hotspots for the scope of the standard.

Key questions

How can I ensure that the standard is going to deliver on its promises?

How can I be confident that the standards are applicable locally?

How can sustainability standards help me with my analysis of critical hotspots?

3 Assurance

Assurance of a sustainability standard covers the various processes to assess compliance with the standard. The overall assurance methodology and structure for the scheme should be publicly available, and full audits of at least a sample of clients, including office visits and on-site assessments of operations, should be carried out. Assurance bodies are also required to implement a management system that supports consistency, competence and impartiality.

Transparency is important for the credibility of a standard. Standards are required to make both their complaints and appeals process for certification decisions and summaries of certification assessment reports publicly available.

The competence of auditors and assurance body personnel is demonstrated through regular evaluation and there needs to be an oversight mechanism that is independent of the assurance bodies being assessed.

Key questions

How can I be confident that the sustainability standards' requirements are met?

How can I trust that the audit will pick up problems and non-compliance with the standards?

How do I know which issues a supplier needs to improve?

4 Chain of Custody

Credible sustainability standards systems ensure traceability along the supply chain (Chain of Custody). Chain of custody verification is required if the scheme results in a communication of product origin from certified production.

Enough information is documented in the chain of custody assessment to enable tracing of the product and to avoid fraud in the supply chain.

Key questions

How can I be confident that my product has been traced accurately through the supply chain?

How can I trust that fraud in the supply chain is addressed?

5 Claims and labels

Requirements for the use of claims and labels are publicly available and include minimum requirements for certified product content allowed for use of claims. Credible standards also ensure that the types of claims allowed are appropriate considering the chain of custody

models being applied. Allowable claims and labels contain enough information that their validity can be checked.

The standards system also employs surveillance strategies to monitor and rectify misuse of claims and labels.

Key question

How can I ensure that the claims I want to make are appropriate?

Further information

The elements of credible standards are drawn from the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice.

Standards systems should defer to the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice and compliance evaluation process for a more complete measure of their operating practices.

Further information about the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice is available at www.iseal.org/codes

Compare how standards cover critical elements using the Processes tab on the ITC Standards Map database.

Further information about ITC Standards Map is available at www.standardstmap.org



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About ISEAL Alliance

ISEAL Alliance is the global membership association for sustainability standards. ISEAL is a non-governmental organisation whose mission is to strengthen sustainability standards systems for the benefit of people and the environment.

We are the global leader in defining and communicating what good practice looks like for these sustainability standards.

The four goals of ISEAL are to:

- › Improve the impacts of sustainability standards
- › Define credibility for these standards
- › Improve their effectiveness, and
- › Increase their uptake.

Further information about the ISEAL Alliance and its membership is available at www.iseal.org