

# How Does Business Address the Social Justice Dimension of Sustainability?

Seattle University, Center for Environmental Justice & Sustainability 2013-14 grant -- April Atwood, PhD

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Today we academics consider 'sustainability' to encompass social impacts and resulting justice implications as well as environmental impacts and long-range implications, but in the realm of 'Sustainable Business,' the perspective is usually very different. The term 'Triple Bottom Line (TBL),' a phrase first coined by John Elkington, an environmental consultant, states that the success of a company needs to be measured not just in terms of the traditional, financial 'bottom line,' but also in terms of its social and environmental impacts. The social, or 'people,' dimension of the TBL framework encompasses fair and beneficial business practices toward labor forces (employees at all levels of the supply chain) and toward local and regional communities in which a company carries out its enterprise. In practice, the social dimension has been relegated to a distant third in much corporate reporting.

On the positive side, there are steps being taken toward recognizing, understanding, and measuring social actions and impacts by businesses, though these steps are in relative early stages, compared to ecological impact reporting. The range of business approaches includes:

- publishing a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report, which chronicles the corporate activities with respect to various stakeholders.
- adopting a structured reporting systems, so that sustainability activities are recounted in more than anecdotal form
- qualifying for a certification of some sort—there are many different certifications and certifying organizations, each with their own set of standards and requirements
- applying an alternative (nontraditional) company organization and governance options to the business: one organizing framework recently that is gaining traction in many states is the B Corp

Thus far, this research project work has included:

- reviewing of published documents and sources including the CSR reporting practices of dozens of companies listed on various 'top socially responsible companies' lists worldwide—an interesting finding is that there is little overlap between the lists of 'top' companies
- researching and reviewing the various reporting systems and frameworks that businesses are using to describe their company efforts—some reporting systems have been updated and new ones are coming into use
- researching and reviewing the certification programs and schemes that are relevant to assessing social impacts of businesses—there is considerable 'turmoil' in the marketplace for 'socially responsible' certification programs
- and reviewing published reviews and assessments of attempts to benchmark best practices in business social impact reporting—most efforts in this arena are at least 10 years old and the field of social impact reporting has grown significantly more complex in recent years

Work still underway:

- informal interviews with business practitioners who are engaged in assessing corporate social impacts
- summary of findings to date and identification of 'holes' to be addressed in the research
- writing the draft and final versions of this research project activities and findings

Results will be shared with the Center for Environmental Justice & Sustainability and its supporters through presentation(s) during spring quarter 2014.