Trade union involvement in non-technical standardization

The international standards body, ISO, has produced a flurry of draft social, ethical and environmental standards of late. Italian trade unionist Ornella Cilona reflects on her participation in the work culminating in the adoption of a standard on the “social responsibility of organizations”.

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After the flood of standards on “quality management” at work, standards development bodies have moved into “human resource management”. Image © ImageGlobe
Trade union involvement in non-technical standardization can be an effective bulwark for workers’ rights if national standards bodies take trade union and other stakeholders’ contributions fully on board. This is the main lesson I have learned in my five years chairing the Technical Committee on Social Responsibility of Organizations in the Italian standards body UNI. In 2003, UNI decided to set up a new Technical Committee on Social Responsibility in which the social partners and NGOs would work together on improving knowledge and awareness of sustainable development in Italy.

This Technical Committee took a lead on the ISO’s 2004 decision to set up a Working Group (WG) on Social Responsibility to draft a global standard on the matter. The big innovation in this new group compared to other ISO working groups, was the input of stakeholders like government, trade unions, employers’ associations and NGOs in drafting the standard from the off.

I was on the UNI delegation at the first meeting of the ISO WG on Social Responsibility in Brazil in February 2005 at which drafting of the standard, now known as ISO 26000, got under way. Seven plenary meetings of the Group were held between 2005 and 2010 at which discussions on procedures occasionally became heated.

The WG agreed the crucial principle that every part of ISO 26000 should be written by consensus – i.e., without sustained opposition – of all six categories of stakeholder: government; trade unions; employers’ associations; NGOs; consumer associations; service, support, research and others. Consensus, stakeholder identification and involvement, and a focus on the needs and demands of emerging economies are key to understanding the huge importance of ISO 26000 to the standardization process in its fullest meaning.

ISO 26000 was launched in late 2010. The main aims of these guidelines are: to provide practical guidance on social responsibility, identifying and engaging with stakeholders; to promote common terminology on social responsibility consistent with existing documents, international treaties and conventions; and to broaden awareness of the matter. The standard applies to all organizations, not just companies, and is neither intended nor appropriate for certification purposes.

ISO 26000 lays down seven principles of SR: Accountability; Transparency; Ethical behaviour; Respect for stakeholder interests; Respect for the rule of law; Respect for international norms of behaviour; and Respect for human rights. Social responsibility is defined as “responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that:

- contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society;
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders;
- is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour;
- is integrated throughout the organization and practiced in its relationships”.

Most EU Member States have adopted ISO 26000 as a national standard. Only Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg and Slovenia have not done so.

Trade unions were the least well-represented stakeholders in the ISO Social Responsibility WG for two reasons. First, shortage of funding prevented many trade unionists from attending the eight plenary meetings: the ISO could only fund attendance for a few from emerging economies. Second, many national standards bodies did not ask the unions to serve on the Mirror Committees that were to track preparation of the standard. Even so, trade unions did manage to get a comprehensive distillation of responsible labour practices consistent with ILO international labour standards written into ISO 26000.

“We support the emphasis given to authoritative international instruments in ISO 26000 as well as the recognition that it is not for individual organisations to unilaterally define the interests of society”, said ITUC General Secretary Sharon Burrow in September 2010.

ISO and social standards: what is the union role?

A Post Publication Organization (PPO) was set up in 2010, principally to advise the ISO on interpretation of the standard and proposals for revising it. PPO members also gather information on good and bad practices in using ISO 26000. In late 2013, the ISO will ask its members whether they wish to keep the standard as is, change or withdraw it. This is a systematic review the ISO does for standards three or five years after publication.

As I mentioned above, ISO 26000 is not a management system standard and is not intended for certification purposes. And while consultants very much favour having a new certifiable ISO standard on social responsibility based on the contents of ISO 26000, unions are opposed to the idea because it betrays the most innovative aspect of the standard, which calls for labour organizations along with other stakeholders to oversee the implementation of socially responsible initiatives by companies.

With ISO 26000 published, the ISO started work on new social standards that may affect trade union activities in a big way. The most important one currently being
drafted is on human resource management (ISO Technical Committee (TC) 260, set up in 2011). This new standard would aim to offer "broad, coordinating guidance to human resources practitioners" and to harmonize "disparate practices for the benefit of organizations and their employees". ISO TC 260 "would be responsible to develop management system standards in the field of human resources management, the effect of which would be to promote reliable and transferable approaches to workforce management in developed and emerging economies".

The proposed new ISO standard on human resource management is opposed by the ILO as treading on its toes, and by some national standards bodies, such as Germany and Japan. Some months ago the International Organization of Employers (IOE) decided to join ISO TC 260, while trade unions are deeply concerned that a standard on human management might undermine labour rights and collective bargaining. Another important ISO social standard in the works is on learning services for non formal education and training.

The ISO's growing focus on social issues arguably makes it important for trade unions to be more involved in its activities. It is crucial for unions to oppose them if they undermine the ILO and international and national trade unions' key role in defending labour rights and strengthening collective bargaining. It is also crucial that national standards bodies, as ISO members, identify and involve unions in their work. Training activities and resourcing for union committee representatives are needed to ensure full and effective participation by trade unions in the technical committees. The ISO should do more on this, drawing on the experience of ISO 26000.

Spotlight
ETUI comparative labour law researcher
Isabelle Schömann answers three questions

The ISO 26000 standard is titled “social responsibility of organizations" whereas in Europe we are more used to "corporate social responsibility". Why the different names?

Isabelle Schömann — There's a lot behind it. Informed sources – a member of the French delegation on the negotiating team – suggest that it comes about as the result of raised tensions and heavy lobbying. The employers thought the idea of “corporate social responsibility" stigmatised business and was bad for its image by branding companies as “black sheep". Stopping focusing exclusively on businesses and bringing in the state as a participant in the economy was one way to restore that image.

The view that companies are not the only ones accountable to society is understandable, but the idea of "corporate social responsibility" absolutely does not absolve the State from responsibility, because it also applies to public undertakings.

More concerning is that dropping the reference to companies kicks into touch the basic reasons behind the idea for the international standard. It was an initiative of consumer organizations to try and stem the toll taken by the activities of both public and private – businesses on society at large, i.e., on workers, the environment, housing and so on.

What can this standard be expected to actually do, given that it is voluntary with no international "certification" or "labelling" process?

I. S. — It's very hard to say, no easier than to assess the fall-out of the debate engaged at European level on "corporate social responsibility". It's the first international standard to have a much more political than technical focus. What it does is to refer directly to international instruments, in particular the ILO Conventions which have the force of law but are not addressed directly to individuals or companies but rather to the states that ratify them. Hopefully, one impact will be that private players in states that have not ratified these conventions will implement the principles that ISO 26000 refers to, in particular freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, abolition of child labour, and so on.

Now, the standard refers to public instruments that have the force of law, but names them differently: it talks not of fundamental rights, but standards of behaviour. They have been put under the different banner of a private standard for which there will be no certification process, meaning that there will be no enforcement. Implementation of the standard will be self-managed. We know that doesn't work. Because the standard will be implemented on an opt-in basis, there is a risk of companies picking and choosing among ILO standards, such as by discarding those on trade union freedoms.

Consumer organizations were the moving force behind the ISO 26000 standard, and trade union input was relatively slight. Why were they so little involved?

I. S. — Lack of funds. The meetings were held all over the world, and that costs. Also, national governments failed to keep the unions informed.

I also think that corporate social responsibility doesn’t play very well with the trade union movement. The unions tried to claim ownership of “corporate social responsibility" when it came onto the European Commission’s agenda, since when it has been one disappointment and one knockback after another.

"Corporate social responsibility" was held out as being something in which all interests are taken into account, where all stakeholders have their say. It became clear that this was not the case, that the entire social aspect had been watered down and the existence of Directives was used as an excuse to avoid any discussion of anything to do with labour law, or health and safety at work.

Further reading