

How Standards Contribute to Human Well-Being: A Conceptual Framework

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In the fall of 2011, agriculture and forestry standards in the ISEAL Alliance set out to identify a set of common metrics to help track their contributions to improving human well-being and reducing poverty. The first step in this process was to agree on a shared vision of how standard systems seek to improve human well-being. Each standard system has a different theory of how change occurs and employs different strategies to promote sustainable livelihoods and reduce poverty, and yet there are many common elements in the approaches and goals across systems. These common elements are captured in this conceptual framework. The framework depicts how standard systems work at the primary production level to improve human well-being.

Explaining the framework

The impact goal: The end goal in the conceptual framework is significant and sustained improvement in human-well being at the household level. Human well-being is multi-dimensional, and includes economic, environmental, human, social, and political dimensions. Higher incomes are part of the picture, but equally important are control over resources, quality of life, and empowerment.

The pathways to impact: The pathways on the diagram represent the sorts of changes that standard systems seek to make in order to achieve the impact goal – improvements in natural resource management, production, business resilience, producer group organisation, participation, labour rights, and community development. Along each pathway, we would expect to first see the direct, short-term outputs of the standard system's activities (e.g. trained and knowledgeable farmers and workers, new business systems, newly formed producer groups). Farther down the pathways come medium-term outcomes, such as better management of natural resources, increased and higher quality production, higher and more stable revenues, more accountable producer groups, better working conditions, more voice and participation, and new services and infrastructure for communities. As one moves down the pathways, the influence of external factors grows. Achievement of the end impact goal depends both on the actions of the standard systems and on many other factors outside their direct control.

The strategies: What kinds of actions do standard systems take to try to improve human well-being? The core of the standard system is the standard itself, which establishes practice or performance requirements for enterprises, producers, or producer groups to follow. Standard systems also support the implementation of the standard through technical training and organisational development. Once basic standard requirements are met, enterprises and producers may opt for certification and for the market access that this opens up. Standard systems operate or supervise assurance programs that check compliance with the standard, and many have market development programmes that actively work to open markets for certified products.

The actors: Enterprises, producers, and producer groups are subject to the requirements of sustainability standards and are the central actors in this conceptual framework. Workers and the surrounding communities are also affected by standard systems' activities. The standard systems set requirements, require training or notifications, and establish systems and committees that include or otherwise affect workers and community members.

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