

EXPERT COMMENTARY

Application of Standards as Instruments of Sustainable Development

Introduction

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. According to ISO/IEC Guide 2, a Standard is defined as a document established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines, or characteristics of activities or their results aimed at achieving the optimum degree of order in a given context.

Potentials of Standards

A number of standards have target-specific and goal-specific relevance. For example, standards developed by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) are indispensable for the attainment of Goal 7, as they ensure the safety and dependability of core infrastructure projects such as wind farms and smart grids, promote energy efficiency and the transition to modern energy services. Standards support companies and communities in conceiving and bringing to the market cleaner and more energy-efficient products, helping protect and conserve environmental resources. As regards the economic dimension of the 2030 Agenda, standards implementation increases access to international markets, as large multinational corporations base their contracts to first and second-tier suppliers on product standards, and often, also on their adherence to common process standards.

Relationship between Standards and Sustainability

Standards contribute to sustainability by taking occupational health and safety and environmental protection into consideration such as ISO 45001 and ISO 14001. They offer expert tried and true solutions to technical questions of environmental protection and facilitate regulation by providing uniform terminology, specifying substantive requirements, defining limit values and laying down standardized methods of measurements. The series of international standards on environmental management not only serves to ensure the environmental sustainability of industrial products and processes but also encourages environmental awareness among employees, thus helping businesses minimize the use of non-renewable resources, achieve legal stability and meet customer demands. The social aspects of sustainable development are also being dealt with through standards on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) such as ISO 26000.

How Standards could be greater leveraged for sustainable outcomes in Malawi

Standards as a common language: More and more private and public partners disclose and report on their progress using internationally agreed standards. That makes results achieved by different organizations immediately comparable. They can be more easily matched against specific SDGs and targets and aggregated across countries and sectors. This is why standards are sometimes called the world's 'common language'. Leaving out standards in the equation leaves consumers confused and unable to choose responsibly manufactured products and services. At the other end of the supply chain, enforcement of standards may sometimes leave firms struggling with the costs of multiple certifications and auditing.



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Standards are about scaling up technological solutions: In the context of sustainability, UN agencies, standards bodies and quality assurance institutions provide integrated regulatory solutions that build on standards, and also include ways to measure conformity and address non-compliance.

Standards provide assurance that commitments are honoured: One important characteristic of standards is that commitments and adherence to agreed parameters can readily be assessed and measured. Markets are flooded with products that do not comply with regulations or are not responsibly produced.

As mentioned before, standards if properly used can be a cornerstone of sustainability. We will not reach the Paris Agreement goals if we cannot measure greenhouse gas emissions, or if products in our markets are not checked to ensure compliance with stringent environmental standards.

In Malawi biomass, energy provides up to 93% of the country's total energy needs. The majority of wood energy users are found in the rural areas where almost 85% of the population lives. Various studies conducted at a national level in Malawi have shown that the national annual trend for fuelwood demand and usage exceeds wood supply. Malawi's annual wood consumption is estimated at 11.7million m³ against wood production of 5.3 million m³, leaving a deficit of 6.4 million m³ of wood annually. This has forced the government and various organizations to introduce a number of cooking technologies aimed at reducing this high fuelwood usage at the household level. Hence, standardization of the improved cookstoves contributes to sustainable development as the standards are critical in evaluating the safety of the cookstoves hence promoting commercial success and encouraging regulator and public acceptance. The development of standards is one way of ensuring quality for products.

Conclusion

Standards help to make life simpler and increase the reliability and effectiveness of products and services. They increase product image and give the customer a certain guarantee about the quality. The improved cookstoves use much less firewood than traditional stoves and are easy and convenient to use hence helping households to avoid the use of open fires which both pollute the air in and outside the home.

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