

The article is published in the CRnet Newsletter 5/2010, 27.05.2010

Copenhagen meeting moved ISO 26000 to its final stage

By Laila Törnroos

In Copenhagen last week (14-21.5.2010) the ISO Social Responsibility (SR) working group reached an agreement on a revised final draft of the future ISO 26000 Guidance on social responsibility standard. This means that the standard most probably will be published already in the end of this year.

The development process has been on for several years, and more than 23 000 comments have been written. About 470 experts, including observers and 40 liaison organisations, representing over 80 countries had registered for the Copenhagen meeting. Taking into account the great number of people involved representing very diverging views and backgrounds, one has to say that the final draft is a good compromise and shows that it is possible to reach consensus on even very controversial issues.

Controversial topics

The Copenhagen Key Topics, solved by the meeting, included previously well discussed issues like "sphere of influence" and "stakeholder interests". New for this meeting was the issue on non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Participants from Gulf and Arab states expressed their concerns regarding the term that was not acceptable from their point of view. On the other hand, especially delegates from Sweden underlined the importance of the wording of this kind of discrimination in the standard.

A "small" group of about 60 persons was formed with the mission of trying to solve the problem. All in all, it took nearly 10 hours until a conclusion was reached. The term "sexual orientation" is now deleted and replaced by "personal relationships". Not everyone was completely happy with the solution, but the delegates could anyhow live with the compromise and the proposed future actions.

Industry views on the standard

One of the veteran SR experts Anne Gadegaard Larsen, advisor at Novo Nordisk, has actively been involved in arranging this Copenhagen meeting and has been part of the process for developing the standard since 2004. Although she is very busy, she found the time to sit down and discuss the standard with me.

I met Anne for the first time at the ISO 26000 preparation meeting in Stockholm 2004, and she was very much in support of the standardisation initiative. The standard is important not only for companies but for all organisations, the whole society and whoever finds sustainable development crucial, Anne explains.

But does this standard add anything new to what we already have in terms of SR guidelines and initiatives?

Yes, answers Anne. ISO 26000 is a common reference point and people now know what social responsibility is and what we are discussing. The standard is a first step in a multi stakeholder and global process. Organisations have for a long time needed a reference for their SR communication. Now we can at least state something like "We have been inspired by ISO 26000" to show conformity with the principles and issues set out in the guidelines.

Will Novo Nordisk go for SR certification?

We don't know yet, answers Anne. Dansk Standard, DS, is making a national ISO 26000 based management standard for certification. If Novo Nordisk decides to go for certification, we need to find out what to do to achieve it. We will start by making a review and a GAP analyses to see where we can make improvements and changes. The standard gives a new way to look at things, but at Novo Nordisk we haven't identified new topics so far. The standard will perhaps make changes on a process level.

New systems have to be compatible with our existing ones, for example Global Manufacturing Practices, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001. We already have a very large number of standards for operating practices and procedures, and therefore it is not easy to decide whether we will continue with this new SR certification or not.

Some challenges

The standard does not give us answers to all problems, explains Anne. It does not, e.g. give us clear advice on how to act in conflicting situations when working in countries with other cultures and other ways of looking at things. For example, what should we do when we face cast discrimination? Neither does the standard give us practical guidance on how to solve challenges related to supply chain management. As it is now, suppliers need to answer a large number of enquiries on SR issues. How should we make this more efficient and practical?

The content of the standard is as good as it for the moment can be, comments Anne. There certainly are areas for improvement but these cannot be identified until we have started the implementation process. We need to test the standard on a practical level and for a while we just need to put the development process aside and publish the standard. After some experience we can again take a look at it and start to improve it.

At the end of the day we need to believe that Social Responsibility is making good business and minimising risks. And we have to keep in mind that the standard is for all organisations, not only for companies, Anne Gadegaard Larsen concludes her views on ISO 26000.