

## ISO moves towards a social responsibility standard

*An ISO standard on social responsibility is well on track for completion by 2008 following a successful meeting in Bangkok, reports Paul Hohnen*

Progress towards developing a generally-agreed definition of how organisations should understand - and respond to - their social responsibilities has taken a small but significant step forward in Bangkok at the 2nd meeting of the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) Social Responsibility Working Group (SRWG).

Among the over 30 resolutions taken by the meeting, three were crucial to whether the process would move ahead. These were on the content of the so-called "design specification" (what should be contained in the standard); on the negotiation process (how the negotiations would proceed); and on resources (how to ensure the necessary finances to allow for balanced representation from all regions and stakeholder constituencies).

To the surprise and relief of the 400 assembled representatives from industry, government, labour and consumer bodies, and NGOs from around the world - not to forget the assorted national standards bodies, consultants, academics and others who also participated - agreement was reached on these key issues.

Equally importantly, there was no attempt to re-open fundamental questions such as whether or not an ISO standard was necessary, and whether this would be more than a guidance standard.

It is now settled that the ISO 26000 standard will be simply a guidance standard and not suitable for certification.

### **Architecture**

The most important agreement reached was on the broad architecture of what the 26000 standard would look like. In ISO parlance, the design specification amounts to an annotated table of contents. By the end of the week, the SRWG had agreed on a design specification that included ten sections:

- \* an introduction, outlining the purpose of the standard;
- \* definitions of the scope, including the subject of the standard and limits of applicability;
- \* a list of "normative references" (documents which must be read in conjunction with the standard);
- \* a section providing definitions of terms used;
- \* description of the historical and contemporary contexts for SR and its concept;
- \* guidance on SR principles relevant to all organisations;
- \* guidance on core SR subjects and issues;
- \* practical guidance on implementing these principles and issues, including related reporting and communication matters;
- \* guidance annexes (where these may be considered necessary); and

\* a bibliography of relevant background materials.

## Process and resources

The second area of progress related to the process for moving ahead. In addition to agreeing that the next meeting would be held in Lisbon sometime in the second quarter of 2006, the SRWG decided to establish three new task groups that would develop the content of the draft standard.

Task Group 4 will address the scope, SR context and principles relevant to organisations. Task Group 5 will take forward work on core SR subjects and issues guidance. And Task Group 6 will work on guidance for organisations on implementing SR. The logic behind the different groups is to provide a system of checks and balances, and ensure expert and diverse inputs.

The outcome of discussions about resourcing for the process was less clear-cut. On the one hand, it was recognised that more financial resources are required to ensure that the necessary expertise, diversity and balance are available to ensure a credible process. If the ISO 26000 Guidance Standard which emerges is to be used by, and useful for, all organisations, it needs to reflect the perspectives of all user groups.

While developing country representation, especially from Africa, was increased at the Bangkok meeting, there was a sense that there were still representational gaps. Informal consultation suggested that some regions (eg Middle East) and sectors (eg development, human rights, environment and health) were under-represented.

Moreover, since many of the current and potential representatives come from non-profit organisations, there will be a need to secure funding to assist their engagement throughout the process.

While the meeting recognised the need for funding, and noted that a small number of (mainly Nordic) governments had provided support from their development assistance budgets, concern was expressed that the current level of funding would be inadequate to guarantee the level of participation.

## What next?

With the broad framework issues out of the way, the negotiations can now begin in earnest. The first step will be to agree on the composition of the task groups that will be responsible for drafting text for the full working group to consider. As with the wider process, the challenge here will be to ensure that the groups have the necessary representational balance, expertise and continuity. Once the task groups are in place, drafting of text can begin. As always, the devil will be in the detail.

While it is impossible at this stage to speculate about what will be in the standard, scheduled to be completed by 2008, a few things are already clear.

Firstly, it now seems certain there will be an ISO social responsibility standard that will be available for use by all organisations. This in itself is an historic step.

Secondly, the SRWG has now become the leading global multi-stakeholder forum for debate on what is meant by social responsibility and how it should be applied by organisations on a day-to-day basis.

Thirdly, the standard is yet to be written. This gives supporters of SR, and its opponents, the

chance to argue out their positions.

Finally, the 26000 drafting process provides an ideal framework for sorting out how best to use and build on existing SR initiatives - such as the OECD MNE Guidelines, UN Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, and ISO's own 9000 and 14000 standards series - and to fill in any gaps that user organisations perceive.

However far the ISO SRWG process is able to go, it does seem likely that the concept of social responsibility will be changed forever.

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