

## International Standards

The International Organization for Standardization – also known as “ISO” – began creating technical standards for things like hardware and photo film in the late 1940s. In recent years, however, this little-known organization has been expanding into matters relating to social and environmental policy.

Yet ISO’s quiet transformation from creating technical engineering standards to developing standards related to environmental and social policy has gone virtually unnoticed and unchecked by environmental and social justice organizations. Like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the rules established by ISO will have a major impact on national and local environmental issues – from the environmental management standards deployed by major multinational corporations to eco-labeling, water privatization, global warming and corporate social responsibility.

Environmentalists and social justice advocates cannot continue to ignore ISO; we must get involved in shaping these standards and guiding the direction of their implementation.

### ISO Already Impacts Environment

Already, ISO 14000 standards, which govern organizations’ environmental management practices, are being widely used by governments around the world. In Europe, for example, the ISO 14001 environmental management system standard has become the centerpiece of the newest version of its voluntary regulation, the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS).

Other ISO standards have already caused controversy in countries where they are inconsistent with existing consumer protection laws and/or weaken certification initiatives led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The ISO eco-labeling standard ISO 14021, for example, is inconsistent with certain aspects of national consumer protection laws, including the U.S. Federal Trade Commission’s Green Guidelines.

Another example: ISO’s guidance on forestry management can be used by companies in conjunction with ISO 14001 in lieu of the more rigorous – and credible from an NGO perspective – Forest Stewardship Council certification.

Not only are ISO’s standards often weaker than competing NGO-led standards initiatives, they are potentially far more influential: The World Trade Organization specifically recognizes ISO standards as the world’s “trade-legal” standards, thus any new standards or norms created by ISO have the potential to impact domestic policies and regulation.

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*ISO’s headlong  
rush into new  
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## ISO Moving Rapidly Into New Areas

ISO's move into important areas of social and environmental public policy has been as rapid as it has been diverse. In 2002, ISO Technical Committee 207 began standards work in the area of greenhouse gas emission quantification, verification, and reporting. (ISO's technical committees (TCs) do the actual work of creating new standards and TC 207 is the body responsible for the ISO 14000 environmental management standards.)

Many believe that ISO's new standards on greenhouse gas accounting will directly advance implementation of the Kyoto Agreement on Climate Change. But these standards could also conflict with more rigorous standards, such as the Greenhouse Gas Protocol created by the World Resources Institute and World Business Council on Sustainable Development, or greenhouse gas registries being developed by sub-national and regional governments.

ISO has also made a foray into the critical area of water resource management with the creation of TC 224. This water committee was proposed by the French standards body, AFNOR, and has been tasked with the "standardization of service activities relating to drinking water supply and sewerage".

The fact that France proposed the work is significant because two French corporations – Vivendi and Suez – dominate the international water management services sector, with water projects in 120 countries and with each company providing water to an estimated 100 million people. According to local U.S. water agencies, which voted against French proposal at the time, standardization in this area will accelerate an unacceptable push toward global water privatization. The NGO community in America is also extremely concerned about the impact of these standards on trade and democracy.

ISO's latest and perhaps most significant expansion has been in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In September 2002, ISO established a multi-stakeholder advisory group to explore the feasibility and desirability of ISO creating CSR standards. By June 2004, after having reviewed the report developed by the advisory group, as well as the feedback gathered at the international CSR conference, the ISO decided to develop a guidance standard in the area of Social Responsibility.

Considering ISO's vast market reach, there is a concern this new ISO standard could serve as a competitor for more stringent NGO-led CSR initiatives, or could preempt new government requirements or regulations regarding the social obligations of businesses.



Protestors at WTO demonstration in Seattle, WA September 1999

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*ISO standards  
provide the  
technical building  
blocks for carrying  
out agreements  
within the WTO.*

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### Where it Stops Only ISO Knows

It is uncertain how far ISO will go in expanding the scope of its work, but ISO's long-term plan clearly shows its intent to move beyond its traditional scope of technical standards setting, and into the social and environmental arenas. Its strategic planning document released in July 2003 was titled as "ISO Horizon 2010: Standards for Sustainable World" and states, "ISO standards can serve products and services that enter into world trade and that impact on the health, safety, environment and social progress of mankind."

Environmental and social justice groups should be concerned by these moves because, historically, ISO has developed standards that primarily benefit industry. Today, not surprisingly, ISO is an institution that is disproportionately represented by business, and, unless things change dramatically, it will continue to produce standards that have favor industry.

ISO's move into the policy realm has not been accompanied by a parallel shift in the representation of important stakeholders within ISO. Because of the technical complexity and low public profile of ISO, many groups that have a direct stake in ISO's new work are unaware of the organization and its impact on environmental and social policy. The combination of the shifting content of standards and the lack of balanced representation is cause for action.

### INNI: Coordinating the Response

ISO's recent moves to expand its standards-making activities into water management, climate change, corporate social responsibility, and environmental reporting have compelled the Pacific Institute to expand its efforts as well.

It is our belief that ISO's headlong rush into new areas of standardization can only be addressed by a more informed and coordinated response from members of the environmental and social justice communities. With funding support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Pacific Institute in 2002 created and continues to lead an international network of civil society groups that works to track and influence ISO's activities.

The goal of the *International NGO Network on ISO (INNI)* is to ensure that any ISO-created standards serve the public interest by protecting the environment and improving social justice. We aim to do this by conveying timely information on the activities of ISO to network organizations so that they can activate their members, provide guidance to decision-makers, and shape public opinion.

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*Climate Change,  
Water Resource  
Management,  
Corporate Social  
Responsibility –  
International  
standards will  
impact a host of  
issues critical to  
environmentalists.*

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#### **INNI's Issue Focus**

INNI will provide information and analysis on all of ISO's activities that effect environmental and social concerns with a special focus on:

- **Water resource management**  
(all activities relating to TC 224)
- **Climate change**  
(standards work within TC 207)
- **Corporate social responsibility**  
(ISO's Working Group on Social Responsibility)
- **Environmental reporting**  
(draft standard ISO 14063)
- **NGO participation within ISO**  
(work of TC 207 NGO Task Group)

# International NGO Network on ISO

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The Pacific Institute's activities are carried out both "within" and "outside" ISO. Through participation in the work of ISO committees, both in the U.S. and internationally, the Institute monitors and works to influence the development of international standards.

Our effort to inject a public interest perspective into the deliberations of ISO are shaped by inputs provided by the INNI membership, however, when advocating "NGO positions," the Pacific Institute only speaks on behalf of itself, not other network members.

As part of its outreach and education activities, the Institute provides information via the Internet, in print, and through consultation and strategy sessions with directly affected, top-level NGOs. The Institute manages the INNI website ([www.pacinst.org/inni](http://www.pacinst.org/inni)) and publishes a quarterly electronic news bulletin, the INNI Online Update.

## Joining the INNI

INNI briefings will be provided by a Pacific Institute-managed email list.

To join the INNI Online Update email distribution list, please go to [www.pacinst.org/inni](http://www.pacinst.org/inni) email us at: [inni@pacinst.org](mailto:inni@pacinst.org).

To join or learn more about the INNI, visit [www.pacinst.org/inni](http://www.pacinst.org/inni) or contact:

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or Jason Morrison ([jmorrison@pacinst.org](mailto:jmorrison@pacinst.org))

## About the Pacific Institute

The International NGO Network on ISO is a project of the Pacific Institute's Economic Globalization and the Environment (EGE) program.

The Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment and Security is dedicated to protecting our natural world, encouraging sustainable development, and improving global security by providing independent research to policy-makers, researchers, non-governmental organizations, and the public. Founded in 1987 and based in Oakland, California, the Pacific Institute focuses on issues at the intersection of development, environment, and security. Underlying all of the Institute's work is the recognition that the pressing problems of environmental degradation, regional and global poverty, and political tension and conflict are fundamentally interrelated, and that long-term solutions require an interdisciplinary perspective.

To learn more, please visit our Website at <http://www.pacinst.org> or contact us by phone, fax or letter.

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