

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 the voluntary Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS2).

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

Another example: the Technical Committee 207 report 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. (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.)

Not only are ISO’s standards often weaker than competing standards created by NGOs, 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 within its technical committees have the potential to impact domestic policies and regulation.

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ISO Moving Rapidly Into New Areas

ISO's move into important areas of environmental public policy has been as rapid as it has been diverse. In June 2002, TC 207 approved a proposal to begin new work in the area of greenhouse gas emissions accounting and reporting.

Many believe that ISO's new standards on greenhouse gas measurements will directly advance implementation of the Kyoto Agreement on Climate Change. But these standards could also conflict with more rigorous standards created by environmental NGOs, like the World Resources Institute/ World Business Council on Sustainable Development greenhouse gas protocols.

Also in June 2002, ISO's committee on consumer policy (COPOLCO) passed a resolution recommending that ISO consider new standards work in the area of corporate social responsibility. These standards might include guidance on the creation of corporate responsibility policies, processes for stakeholder engagement, and measurement and reporting of corporate responsibility practices.

Last fall, ISO made a foray into the critical area of water resource management with the creation of a new Technical Committee, TC 224. The new 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".

This 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, 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.

Where it Stops Only ISO Knows

It is uncertain how far ISO will go in expanding the scope of its work, but the ambitions of some within ISO are high. One proposed long-term vision for TC 207 is to be "the leading world-forum for the development of standards that contribute to sustainable development, world trade and improvement of environmental performance of organizations and their products and services." While unlikely that this draft vision will be accepted, ISO is clearly moving into new areas of standards creation.



Protestors at WTO demonstration in Seattle, WA September 1999

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

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.

The Network: 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.

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 community. With funding support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Pacific Institute is creating and will lead an international network of NGOs that will track, and work to influence, the activities of ISO.

The goal of the *International NGO Network on ISO (INNI)* is to ensure that any ISO-created environmental standards serve the public interest and protect our environment. We aim to do this by providing 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.

The Pacific Institute's activities will be carried out both "within" and "outside" ISO. Through participation in the work of TC 207 and TC 224, both domestically and internationally as a United States delegate, the Institute will monitor and influence the development of international standards.

Our effort to inject a public interest perspective into the deliberations of ISO will be shaped by input we receive from you, the network members. However, when advocating "NGO positions," the Pacific Institute will only speak on behalf of itself, not other network members.

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

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**
(COPOLCO's effort to advocate standardization work in ISO)
- **Environmental reporting**
(draft standard ISO 14063)
- **NGO participation within ISO**
(work of TC 207 NGO Task Group)

International NGO Network on ISO

Based on knowledge and insight gained over our five years of work on international standards, the Pacific Institute will provide ISO-related information and analysis to members of the broader environmental community that have a stake in ISO's work, but lack the capacity and resources to follow the standards development process first hand. Once armed with timely and credible information, network members can educate the public, inform policy-makers and shape the implementation of ISO standards by individual companies.

As part of its outreach and education activities, the Institute will provide information via the Internet, in print, and through consultation and strategy sessions with top-level NGOs. The Institute will utilize its existing website and in September 2002 will establish a new listserv with periodic electronic bulletins.

On the forthcoming water management standards being developed by TC 224, we will make a special effort to engage and empower NGOs in developing countries. The push toward privatization and globalization of water has already harmed the ability of NGOs in developing nations to advocate for stronger national standards, transparency, and democratic decision-making. Developing countries stand to lose the most in the push to privatize water management – by being more informed of the potential impacts of TC 224 standards, they also have the most to gain.

There will be two tracks for information flow: one providing more general updates on ISO developments (via the electronic bulletins), the other providing detailed information and strategic guidance to select, directly affected, high-level environmental leaders.

Joining the INNI

INNI briefings will be provided by a Pacific Institute-managed email list. To join the distribution list, please send a short description of your interest areas, along with your name, title and organization to inni@pacinst.org.

For more information on INNI, visit “www.pacinst.org/inni” or contact Jason Morrison, Program Director at:

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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.