Best Practices in Context-Based Sustainability

Center for Sustainable Organizations
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Context-Based Sustainability (CBS) is a particular approach to measuring, managing and reporting the sustainability performance of organizations that is arguably no different, in principle, than the way in which the management of financial performance has always been done.

Managing financial performance, that is, has always been about managing the impacts of organizations on a specific type of capital – economic – and for the benefit or well-being of a specific group of stakeholders: shareholders. The mainstream practice of capitalism has, in that regard, always been monocapitalistic in form. But why stop with economic capital?

In what we and many others now refer to as Triple Bottom Line (TBL) performance, the same thing can be done relative to managing the impacts of organizations on not just one capital, but all of them; and for the benefit of all stakeholders, not just one of them. This in turn we can think of as multicapitalism. Multicapitalism is in fact the basis of TBL performance accounting and the CBS form it takes today.

Briefly described below are the key principles and best practices that ought to be adhered to when practicing CBS, the application of which makes it possible to operationalize TBL accounting in systematic and rigorous ways in organizations. First comes Stakeholder Well-Being as the most foundational principle in context-based TBL accounting, followed by Materiality, a framework for carefully and thoroughly identifying the stakeholders of an organization and the duties and obligations owed to each of them in order for performance to be positive and sustainable.

Stakeholder Well-Being

The purpose of performance management and accounting is to conduct and assess the activities of an organization in such a way as to ensure or enhance the well-being of stakeholders – that is what it means to perform well. Stakeholder well-being, therefore, is the guiding principle of management, the achievement of which necessarily entails the safeguarding of human and non-human well-being. Indeed, any actions that can have the effect of diminishing human or non-human well-being can either directly or indirectly affect the well-being of those whose interests are more directly served by an organization (i.e., its stakeholders), if only through the negative reputational effects of selfish or negative behaviors. Even shareholder value is affected by non-financial performance.
Materiality

The scope of performance management and accounting should be confined to all those areas of impact that correspond to duties and obligations owed by an organization to its stakeholders. Since this will vary by organization, the need to perform materiality determinations is of paramount importance in CBS. Performance assessments, that is, should never be done using predetermined, one-size-fits-all sets of metrics or indicators as if all organizations are alike. Indeed, they are not alike and so the indicators we use to assess their performance should, themselves, be uniquely defined, even if it is the case that multiple organizations will very often have a need to utilize the same, or substantially similar, metrics for areas of impact that are broadly material (e.g., for greenhouse gas emissions, water use, employee wages, product safety, etc.).

Of most importance in making materiality determinations is consideration of the following four key issues:

- **Multiple Capital Accounting**

Performance management and accounting should specifically concern itself with the impacts of organizations on the quality and sufficiency of vital capitals, since it is vital capitals that their stakeholders rely on for their well-being. This includes, of course, the capitals organizations are by design supposed to produce and maintain (e.g., economic capital for shareholders), but also the capitals upon which organizations may have incidental impacts as a consequence of their activities (e.g., the functioning of the Earth’s climate system – a type of natural capital), which one or more other groups directly depend on for their well-being.

The capital construct is especially useful here for three other reasons:

1. It helps us to differentiate between the effects of organizations’ activities on resource stocks and flows, according to which a capital stock can be distinguished from the beneficial services or flows it produces (e.g., the Earth’s climate system is a stock, not to be confused with the ecosystem services it provides in terms of temperature regulation and climate control);

2. It provides us with a non-arbitrary basis for differentiating between social, economic and environmental areas of impact (i.e., the Triple Bottom Line), by which we are able to correlate impacts on specific capitals with the respective bottom lines they pertain to, all in a way that makes quantitative Triple Bottom Line performance measurement and reporting both possible and meaningful;

3. It provides us with an empirical variable that we can use to make such quantitative assessments: namely, the carrying capacities of capitals, a measure of the capacity of specific capitals to satisfy basic human and non-human needs. The sustainability of an organization’s activities, therefore, boils down to what the effects of its activities are on the carrying capacities of vital capitals, as such capacities may be needed in order to ensure stakeholder well-being.
- **Stakeholder Well-Being**

We cannot speak of performance accounting without first raising the question of why we do it, or for whose benefit it should be done. Why, in other words, does the performance of an organization matter? It matters because the well-being of certain groups depends, at least in part, on what the effects of an organization’s activities are and whether or not it survives. Shareholders’ equity, for example, is entrusted to an organization, which in turn is expected to produce a return from it (i.e., a gain in value) at a reasonable rate – and certainly not a loss.

Shareholders, that is, have a stake in the performance of an organization insofar as the effects of its activities can impinge on the quality or sufficiency of the capitals they rely on for their well-being (their economic capital). The same goes for impacts organizations have on other vital capitals, whether for the benefit of shareholders or not. Performance accounting, then, must be stakeholder-based in the sense that the needs and interests of all parties whose well-being may be affected by the activities of an organization, and not just one of them (shareholders), should be at the center of its attention.

Determining materiality, then, is the process we follow in order to identify an organization’s stakeholders, and what the corresponding capitals are that it is either already having impact on, or should be having impact on in ways that can affect their well-being. Stakeholders, in turn, acquire their standing either as a result of the capitals an organization is having impact on (e.g., community members by virtue of the effects a manufacturer is having on local water resources) or because of agreements or contracts it has entered into (e.g., agreements with employees, suppliers, and customers). All of this must be determined in order to do a proper job of defining the scope of a TBL/CBS-based performance management and accounting system.

- **Duties and Obligations**

Once the identity of an organization’s stakeholders and the types of capitals it is, or should be, having impact on have been determined, norms, standards or thresholds for what such impacts ought to be – or must be – in order to be sustainable should be defined. These can be thought of as duties and obligations (Ds/Os) owed by an organization to its stakeholders, the substance of which in performance management and accounting can serve as *organization-specific standards of performance*.

The ethical basis of this principle is quite clear: organizations have no right to undermine or put the well-being of others at risk; and are otherwise accountable for their impacts on vital capitals as set forth in agreements they voluntarily enter into, not to mention as prescribed by law. All such Ds/Os therefore have a role to play in performance management and accounting, and in fact generally underlie the core theory of performance in Context-Based Sustainability (CBS) – that the most important measure of an organization’s performance is the extent to which it abides by its duties and obligations to have impacts on vital capitals (or not, as the case may be) in ways that can affect its stakeholders’ well-being.
The fundamental theory of performance described here is perhaps best understood as one that relies on sustainability as its regulative ideal, since it is the preservation of vital capitals for the sake of stakeholder well-being that is valued so highly in the CBS approach. Impacts that have the effect of diminishing, or that fail to continually create and maintain, vital capitals in accordance with Ds/Os owed to stakeholders are counted towards negative performance, precisely because they put the sufficiency of vital capitals and the well-being of those who depend on them at risk.

Moreover, this same basic theory of performance is arguably the one that has otherwise prevailed in conventional financial accounting for centuries now (i.e., that the economic capital of shareholders must be preserved, if not grown in size, in order for an organization’s financial performance to qualify as positive). In CBS, we simply add social and environmental impacts to the mix and thereby complete the criteria according to which an organization’s overall performance (TBL) can be assessed.

One final point on Ds/Os that should be made here is that voluntary, discretionary or non-obligatory areas of impact on vital capitals rarely qualify as material for inclusion in a performance management and accounting system. Philanthropy and charitable donations, for example, should not be cominged with other areas of impact for which Ds/Os to have impact are more affirmatively normative. Whereas an organization can always be excused for not making charitable donations, it is never permissible for it to pollute the local water supply.

There is, however, an exception to the rule stated above which occurs in cases where an organization has publicly committed itself to what would ordinarily be regarded as voluntary or discretionary acts of kindness. If such commitments are in fact made in ways that have the effect of enlisting investors, customers, new employees, trading partners, brand loyalty or political support of any kind, the areas of impact involved are effectively no longer discretionary and become obligatory. This kind of thing is now starting to happen with increasing regularity amongst so-called purpose-driven organizations such as B Corps and others. For a guide on how this works under the law, readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the doctrine of Promissory Estoppel. It effectively applies to TBL performance accounting, as well.

- **Boundaries, Thresholds and Allocations**

As explained above, the proper scope of an organization’s performance management and accounting system should be determined by reference to 1) the types of capitals it is either already having impact on or should be having impact on, 2) the stakeholders whose interests and well-being are involved, and 3) the corresponding duties or obligations it owes to each of them (as groups) to manage its impacts accordingly. The results take the form of organization-specific standards of performance that can then be used as norms or targets when assessing the sustainability performance of organizations – or their performance, in general.

This raises the question of how specifically to specify targets for what impacts on vital capitals should be once they have been determined to be material. This can be particularly vexing in
cases where the responsibility for preserving vital capitals is arguably shared by an organization with others, such as the shared responsibility to maintain natural capitals, like water, biodiversity, the climate system on Earth, etc. In all such cases, the norms for an organization should be fair, just and proportionate – no more, no less.

The first determination that should be made, then, for specifying normative impacts on material areas of impact, is whether or not the responsibility for maintaining and/or creating the capitals involved are shared or exclusive. The responsibility for upholding a threshold of compensation for employees, for example (e.g., as in the duty to pay employees a livable wage) is exclusive to an organization; the responsibility for maintaining the sufficiency of a water supply for a community’s needs, by contrast, is shared with others in the community itself.

With all this in mind, the process for specifying organization-specific standards of performance (norms) for impacts on vital capitals has three parts to it:

1. **Boundaries** – The first step is to determine what the contextually relevant boundaries of a vital capital are, so that whether the responsibility for maintaining it is shared or exclusive, the substance and extent of it is clearly defined. The boundary of a livable wage, for example (a type of economic capital), is the payroll of employees within an organization itself; the boundary of a supply of water, by contrast, is the geography in which it is found (e.g., a watershed).

2. **Thresholds** – Thresholds specify the extent to which the stocks and flows of capitals within boundaries of interest must be maintained. The magnitudes of capital stocks and flows are sometimes also referred to as their *carrying capacities*, with such capacities being limited in the levels of demand they can support. It is ultimately the carrying capacities of vital capitals that must be maintained at specific levels in order to ensure the well-being of a particular constituency or stakeholder group. The threshold for a livable wage, for example, is the wage level itself that should be paid to all employees within an organization; the threshold for a supply of water, by contrast, is the annual volume of precipitation that occurs in a watershed, the size of which should not be exceeded in use.

3. **Allocations** – Once thresholds have been defined, the next question is the degree to which an individual organization should be held responsible for their maintenance. The allocation or responsibility for paying a livable wage, for example, falls exclusively to an organization itself as the employer; the allocation or responsibility for maintaining natural resources, by contrast, will typically be shared with others, most notably those who also happen to inhabit or use the resources in the same places (boundaries).

Calculating fair, just and proportionate shares of the responsibility to maintain vital capitals in cases where the responsibility is in fact shared with others is typically done by reference to proxies. The proportionate share of an organization’s entitlement to use water resources, for example, might be made in accordance with what its proportionate contribution to GDP is; or what its proportionate headcount in size is (workforce) relative to a background population (e.g., within a watershed). Other
proxies include a reference to what an organization’s proportionate share of production or output is in a sector.

In order to be viable, any such proxy for making allocation determinations must be supported by 1) readily available macro measures of the variable of interest (e.g., GDP or population), and 2) readily available measures of the organization’s own contributions to the same things (e.g., its contributions to GDP or its workforce size).

Last, it should also be clear that whereas allocations in the case of impacts on natural capitals will usually be expressed in terms of not-to-exceed shares of available supplies (consumption), allocations for impacts on all other capitals will be expressed in terms of not-to-fall-below shares of whatever the burden is to continually create and maintain them (production) – e.g., livable wages, workplace safety, product safety, etc.

To be sustainable, that is, an organization must live within its means (natural capital) and ensure the means to live (all other capitals) – fairly, justly and proportionately.

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