

Sustainability Context – What is It?

In corporate sustainability management, context – or *sustainability context*, as the *Global Reporting Initiative* calls it – refers to the combination of circumstances that determines what the norms, standards or thresholds for sustainability performance must be when attempting to judge whether or not an organization’s activities are, or have been, sustainable.

The factors involved in determining context include (a) who an organization’s stakeholders are, (b) what their (the stakeholders’) basic needs are, (c) what the organization’s impacts on related vital capital resources are, or should be, (d) what the status of the relevant vital capitals is, and (e) who else, if anyone, can rightly be regarded as being co-responsible for helping to preserve, create and/or maintain the resources involved at levels required to ensure stakeholder well-being. Proportionate allocations of available resources and/or duties to preserve, create and/or maintain them can then be assigned to individual organizations.

The purpose of establishing context, then, is to make it possible to define norms, standards or thresholds for what an organization’s impacts on vital capital resources must (or would have to) be in order for its activities to be sustainable. Actual impacts can then be measured against such norms, standards or thresholds. Establishing context is therefore an indispensable requirement for measuring, managing and reporting sustainability performance!