

The Essence of Context-Based Sustainability

*Managing impacts on capitals relative to
organization-specific sustainability norms*

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What is Context-Based Sustainability?

- * A compelling approach to sustainability measurement, management and reporting that:
 - Assesses performance relative to organization-specific sustainability *standards of performance*
 - Defines such standards relative to thresholds in the carrying capacities of vital capitals (i.e., resources people rely on)
 - Measures and reports performance in terms of an organization's impacts on such capitals, but only those for which corresponding duties or obligations to stakeholders can be shown to exist (i.e., for material areas of impact)



What Really Differentiates CBS?

- * Whereas most of what passes for mainstream measurement and reporting is *incrementalist* in form and asks ...

What are/were our impacts in relative, intensity or absolute terms?

- * ... *context-based* measurement and reporting, by contrast, asks ...

What are/were our impacts and how do they compare to norms, standards or thresholds for what they would have to be in order to be sustainable (i.e., for us, in our case)?



Thresholds & Allocations

- * A hallmark of CBS is its focus on capital thresholds and allocations
 - Begins by identifying an organization’s material duties and obligations to have impacts on vital capitals of importance to stakeholder well-being
 - Then defines required levels in the carrying capacities of such capitals (thresholds) that must be maintained
 - Then defines an organization’s fair, just and proportionate shares (allocations) of the responsibilities to maintain such capacities at the required levels – is it *all* or *some*?



The logic of defining organization-specific sustainability standards of performance



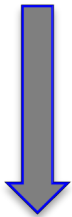
1. Identify vital capitals an organization is and/or ought to be having impact on in ways that can affect stakeholder well-being

2. Determine responsible populations for maintaining the carrying capacities of the capitals involved

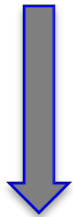
3. Identify fair, just and proportionate shares of the responsibilities to produce and/or maintain the capitals to a specific organization

Organization-Specific Standards of Performance

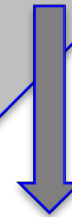
Understanding the carrying capacities of capitals is key!



e.g., water resources impacted by an org's manufacturing activity; the stakeholders involved are everyone else who relies on the same resources



e.g., the entire population of people who share and rely on the water resources in question, including the manufacturer



e.g., first determine the carrying capacity of the water resources involved; then account for natural loss (evapotranspiration); then allocate a share to ecological functions/needs; then fulfill all household needs; and then, last, allocate the remainder to organizations based on their respective contributions to GDP

CBS is More Than Science-Based

- * CBS is inclusive of science-based considerations whenever possible, but is not the *same as* ‘science-based’
 - CBS also takes values, justice, and ethics into account when defining organization-specific sustainability norms
 - Science-based goal-setting and performance evaluations rarely include such normative considerations, but even when they do, it is ethics they are turning to, not science
- * See the [MultiCapital Scorecard](#) for state-of-the-art CBS measurement and reporting in triple bottom line terms



Thank you!

For more information, visit us at:

www.sustainableorganizations.org

See also the CBS Wikipedia page at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Context-Based_Sustainability

Or contact us at:

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