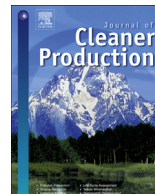




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Cleaner Production

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jclepro

Social Accountability 8000 standard certification: analysis of worldwide diffusion

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 April 2014

Received in revised form

26 December 2014

Accepted 17 January 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility

Management standard

Stakeholder

Sustainability

SA8000 standard

Worldwide diffusion

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the worldwide diffusion of the Social Accountability 8000 standard certification in sixty-five countries and sixty-six activity sectors from 1999 to 2011. The logistic curve model is used to assess the current situation on both a global scale and a local scale. Additionally, instability and concentration indices are used to analyze whether the diffusion process developed in a homogeneous manner across countries and economic sectors. The results (i) increase the understanding of SA8000's diffusion, (ii) provide an exploratory descriptive analysis of the current SA8000 diffusion worldwide in both macro and microanalyses compared with other standards and (iii) identify future trends in SA8000 diffusion concluding that currently SA8000 follows a similar pattern than other standards and, in consequence, a growing trend is expected in next years. These findings suggest some challenges and opportunities. The standard must be more flexible to accommodate the differing perspectives of cultures, increase the dialogue with stakeholders, and include more small companies from developing countries.

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1. Introduction

Currently, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are more strenuously adopted worldwide in companies as a response to stakeholder demands (Fuentes-García et al., 2008). These initiatives have increased in number and popularity in recent decades (Ligteringen and Zadek, 2004) and have been called *ethical* because they provide a moral point of view to justify a common, cross-culturally accepted basis (Gilbert and Rasche, 2007). These initiatives include the United Nations (UN) Global Compact, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) directory for multinational enterprises, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Sullivan's Global Principles, Social Accountability 8000 (SA8000), and ISO 26000. These initiatives are voluntary in nature and differ in detail, but all encourage corporate responsibility regarding environmental and social issues (Gilbert et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, although other management standards, such as environmental standards, have been broadly implemented (Marimon et al., 2010, 2011), social standards have only been modestly adopted in comparison with other standards such as ISO 9001 or ISO 14001 (Franceschini et al., 2004; Marimon et al., 2006, 2010; Llach et al., 2011; Delmas and Montes-Sancho, 2011; Marimon et al., 2012). These initiatives have been classified into four categories (see Gilbert et al., 2011; Rasche, 2012; Brunsson et al., 2012): 1) *Standards* are standards referred to as general principles for sustainable behavior, UN Global Compact or the OECD Guidelines; 2) *Certification standards* as SA8000; 3) *Reporting standards* that provide a framework for sustainable reporting as GRI, and 4) *Process standards* that define processes to enable the creation of management system around sustainability as ISO 26001.

For the aforementioned reason, diffusion analysis with respect to environmental and other standards, such as quality management standards, has been performed and the potential consequences of future standards in managerial and academic issues have been noted (Franceschini et al., 2004; Marimon et al., 2006; Casadesus et al., 2008; Marimon et al., 2010; Casadesus et al., 2010; Franceschini et al., 2010; Llach et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the study of the diffusion of social standards is quite scarce. To date, to the best of our knowledge, studies have been conducted in a

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descriptive way (e.g., Knudsen, 2013; Rajabzadeh, 2013) and there is little research regarding how diffusion happened (see Marimon et al., 2012; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012 for GRI reporting). As Gilbert et al. (2011) asserted, more information is needed regarding the diffusion of these standards to better understand the phenomenon and its impacts.

As far as we know, no other social standard's diffusion has yet been studied. Consequently, there still seems to be room for improvement in this matter, with the aim of identifying diffusion patterns to forecast future trends and the market's disclosure requirements.

This paper is focused on the diffusion of SA8000. This standard has been selected for three reasons. First, this standard is one of the world's first auditable social certification standards for decent workplaces and human rights across all industrial sectors (Gilbert et al., 2011; SAI, 2013). Second, it is one of the most widely used standards in social issues worldwide (Leipziger, 2003; Rajabzadeh, 2013). Finally, according to Lin (2012), SA8000 is the most influential standard in the fields of human rights and labor. Moreover, this standard can help governments adopt legal measures in a proactive way because this standard could address changes in their social environments from a social viewpoint. Social standards such as SA8000 are considered *soft law*. Nevertheless, Gilbert et al. (2011) explained these can become harder over time by means of being selected as a prerequisite for doing business in some industries, or acting in areas where enforceable legal regulation has not yet been enacted.

The diffusion analysis of the standard and its adoption model will enable understanding of the motivations for its implementation and the expected benefits. Regardless, this is not the aim of this paper. It would be excessively pretentious to have this as an additional objective. Nevertheless, this understanding is an important issue that should be addressed in future research.

To analyze the diffusion pattern of the SA8000 standard, the logistic curve is adapted using the available evolution certificate data provided by Social Accountability International (SAI, 2013). Thus, this work pursues three main objectives. First, an analysis will be developed to explain and predict the diffusion of the SA8000 on a worldwide scale. The second will be to compare and analyze SA8000 diffusion among the main industry activities. Finally, an exploratory analysis will be conducted to describe the diffusion stage itself and compare it with other management standards, with the aim of evaluating the differences or similarities in diffusion. We assume that understanding the diffusion of other standards will help enrich the analysis of the SA8000 standard diffusion.

This study contributes to the previous research in three ways. First, this study increases the understanding of SA8000's diffusion. Second, this study provides an exploratory descriptive analysis of the current SA8000 diffusion worldwide in both macro- and microanalyses compared with other standards' worldwide diffusion worldwide. Finally, this study identifies future trends in SA8000 diffusion. Therefore, studying the diffusion of SA8000 could be useful for the standard itself, for companies, and for society. First, the study of the standard could identify areas of improvement in diffusion to prioritize actions. Second, companies could find ways to strengthen their business. Finally, societies with more companies engaged in social issues could improve the quality of life of their citizens.

Pursuant to aforementioned objectives, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The second section provides a review of the literature regarding SA8000. The methodology employed and the statistical results are explained in the third section. The discussion of the results and conclusions are presented in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social Accountability 8000 standard foundation

Social Accountability International (SAI) is an international non-profit multi-stakeholder organization founded in 1997. Its mission is to advance the human rights of workers and to eliminate sweatshops by promoting ethical working conditions, labor rights, corporate social responsibility, and social dialogue around the world. To that aim, SAI is developing and implementing a socially responsible standard, SA8000 (SAI, 2013). The organization has an advisory board with representatives from multinational firms, international unions, and NGOs (O'Rourke, 2006). SA8000 is formulated in accordance with the treaty of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the UN Convention of Child Rights (SAI, 2013). This standard is supported under nine pillars (see Fig. 1), which define guidelines for auditing ethical workplace conditions throughout a global supply chain (Gilbert and Rasche, 2007). Therefore, SA8000 is focused on the scope of work with the aim of improving working conditions of the global labor force (Tsai et al., 2011). In fact, Tsai et al. (2011, pp. 2) has defined the SA8000 standard as “*the first to authenticate international CSR with the objective of imposing humanism on market economics*”. All its requirements are generic and applicable to all type of organizations (Rajabzadeh, 2013).

Furthermore, the SA8000 standard includes an accreditation process. As SAI (2013) asserted “*accreditation is a process similar to licensing, wherein SAAS evaluates an applicant certification firm's capacity to thoroughly audit a workplace for compliance with SA8000. This process includes an audit of a company's written policies, procedures and documentation. Accreditation applicants must demonstrate adherence to SAAS accreditation criteria.*”

SA8000 provides a number of procedures that help companies engage with their stakeholders (Rohitratana, 2002). For that reason, Gilbert and Rasche (2007) noted that stakeholders are the main addressees of standardized ethics initiatives such as SA8000.

Every five years SAI revises the SA8000 standard to ensure its continued relevance and adoptability. This process is conducted in accordance with the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards (the Code). The new standard is under review and will be known as SA8000:2014.

From the stakeholder viewpoint, there are three important features of SA8000. First, it provides guidance regarding taking stakeholders' interests into account in a practical manner. This SA8000 Guidance document is intended to provide some interpretation and examples of application of the SA8000 Standard's requirements for auditors and other users of the Standard. It is not intended to be comprehensive and does not include all matters of

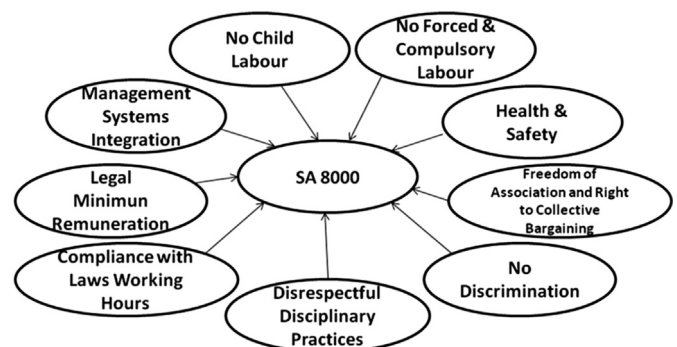


Fig. 1. Pillars of the SA8000 standard.
Source: own elaboration.

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