

Introduction to Social Sustainability

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What exactly is social sustainability, and how do we collectively achieve it? Today we will break down its core definitions and examine how it relates to your work.

The [United Nations](#) classified it as “identifying and managing business impacts, both positive and negative, on people.” It’s a crucial concept for companies at any stage of their development because it reflects how they treat their employees. It highlights what they value and where their priorities lie. Social sustainability focuses on how businesses interact with their stakeholders and how conscious organisations are of their impact on individuals and communities.

In recent years, it has become a global cause in its own right, forefronting the well-being and needs of people rather than just physical and environmental considerations. When you initially think of sustainability, you might think of the climate crisis. The term *climate change*, for example, refers to shifts in temperatures and weather patterns and describes rising sea levels, heat waves, shrinking glaciers, and other physical changes. But it’s not only a geographical phenomenon. Social sustainability examines how work, family, local communities, inequality, climate crises, the law, and broad societal changes link to people’s daily lives. It deals with anything concerning the welfare of humans.

[Diversity for Social Impact](#), an organisation dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion to drive social impact, explains, “Social sustainability is about making sure that communities and societies can thrive and continue to exist in a healthy, fair, and equal way. It focuses on improving people’s quality of life, fostering strong relationships, and ensuring everyone has the chance to fulfill their potential.” “Social sustainability works alongside economic and environmental sustainability.” says [The World Bank Group](#), a partnership that works for sustainable solutions that reduce poverty and build shared prosperity.

Social sustainability has people at its heart. It looks at how businesses can do their part in respecting and protecting citizens. The [UN](#) clearly states, “At a minimum, we expect

businesses to undertake due diligence to avoid harming human rights and to address any adverse impacts on human rights that may be related to their activities.” It also relates to safer working practices, whistleblowing policies, learning and development, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Anything your company does that involves and impacts people falls under social sustainability. Think competitive wages, minimising environmental damage, promoting human rights, eradicating violence against women and girls, tackling discrimination, and advocating for quality healthcare. As you can imagine, social sustainability isn’t something that happens overnight or even within a matter of months. These mighty aims necessitate continual work, constant reflection, and a dedication to change.

In today’s world, businesses are making an effort to “go green”. Social sustainability should be at the forefront of their global consciousness efforts, too. It’s never too early to start, and if you invest in the well-being of people, then your reputation will be all the stronger for it.

When the UN established its 17 Sustainable Development Goals to champion quality of life and global prosperity, one became especially helpful in demonstrating the benefits to business. The 8th goal is “to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” Diversification and innovation are at the forefront of this goal, aiming to upgrade economic productivity for all. It advocates for closing the gender pay gap, encouraging youth employment and ending modern slavery. Protecting labour rights and promoting safe working environments are also key. Businesses can support local communities to prosper. They can provide opportunities and build connections.

Keeping your employees satisfied and motivated means they will be more dedicated to furthering your mission. As [Michael McFall](#), co-founder of Biggby Coffee, writes for Forbes, “Valuable and sustainable companies will invest in and develop their people personally and professionally... People are looking for meaning and purpose, and it’s the leader’s job to help people achieve this outcome.”

Invest in your employees with time, training, development opportunities and clear communication. [The Times](#) suggests that sustainability should be treated alongside your major values. Their article *The sustainability advantage* states: “Businesses have traditionally focused on the top and bottom lines of the profit and loss account. But sustainability warrants a new focus: the green line, integrating non-financial metrics into conventional reporting. With visibility of this new value metric only growing, there is an opportunity to make sustainability profitable and profitability sustainable.”

There are many facets to this topic, but a key aspect to highlight is diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). [“Striving to make sure an organization’s workforce represents a diverse](#)

[group of genders, races, ethnicities, and cultures is vital. Building a diverse company community that encourages and accepts diverse points of view prevents the organization from developing an exclusive culture and philosophy.”](#)

Assess how inclusive and accessible your workplace currently is. As [Michael Bach](#), for Forbes, explains, it’s “important to ensure policies and procedures are enacted as intended. That means it’s important to educate people on the policies and procedures to ensure everyone understands what is expected of them.”

Again, there’s value in collective efforts and a cultural shift to prioritise employee well-being. Creating opportunities and being conscious of which groups have historically been marginalised is essential. Are you aware of the difficulties some of your disabled employees might face? Do you communicate clearly about adoption leave for LGBTQ+ parents? How safe is your workplace for trans colleagues?

Relatedly, consider SDG 5: [Gender Equality](#), which aims to “ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life”. This isn’t an objective for which just one person or business is responsible. It relies on a collective agreement to make changes throughout organisations. Similarly, as Michael McFall [highlights](#), “valuable and sustainable companies will invest in and develop their people personally and professionally.” They address the gender pay gap, facilitate training opportunities, and work to see their team prosper outside of work. There’s not one simple solution to the world’s inequalities, but creating a safe and inclusive workplace is a great place to begin.

Social sustainability needs the equivalent time, resources, and efforts you have given any other thriving part of your business. Embrace the learning opportunity and communicate with colleagues about your goals. Decide together what your objectives are and take the process one step at a time.

The [Network for Business Sustainability](#) advises: “Social sustainability is here to stay. It may not always be as clearly defined as environmental sustainability, but it’s vitally important and open for innovation. Keep exploring what it means to you and your stakeholders: work to develop a shared view of social sustainability priorities and how to make them real.”

It might seem daunting at times, but as long as leaders collectively make conscious, ethical, and inclusive decisions, they are moving towards social sustainability. As [Diversity for Social Impact](#) highlights, it’s “about creating a world where everyone can enjoy a good quality of life, have equal opportunities, and be a part of a supportive community.” Look around and see what changes you can practice in your own life to be more socially conscious. Why not refamiliarise yourself with your company’s diversity and inclusion guidance and modern slavery policies?

There is far more to this concept than we have time to cover here, but the [Global Goals](#) site offers further reading and a fantastic infographic that breaks down all seventeen major areas for sustainable development.