

Product Social Impact Assessment - Interview to João Fontes

Social sustainability is one of the most crucial and critical topics at the moment. When trying to balance economy, environment and society within their product sustainability strategy, companies and organizations often don't know how to move forward.

João Fontes is an expert in sustainability assessment, CSR and social sustainability, and he is somebody who believes in sharing and cooperation. Moreover, he is a very nice person, which makes it a perfect combination.

As social sustainability happens to be one of my favorite topics, I am particularly glad he accepted to answer my questions about his work, his latest achievements and what's going on in this field.

What was the biggest challenge when writing the Handbook for Product Social Impact Assessment?

There were many challenges along the way. The first one was to develop the impact assessment method in a way that it reflected the approaches of the Roundtable participants. Following this, to define which social topics should be proposed. Finally and maybe the most complex one, how to define the reference scales and reference value for the performance indicators, or with other words what should be the baseline for the assessment. It was definitely a challenging process for all of us, and at the same time rewarding as we managed to launch the handbook last year.

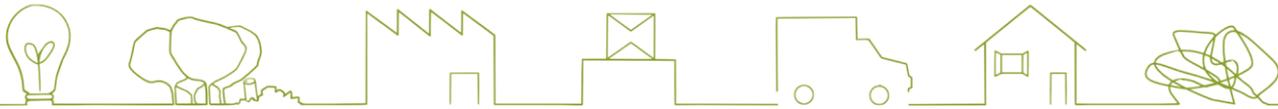
You refer to this approach as social footprint, which is the major difference with social LCA?

Product social footprint is the name that we use at PRé. It means measuring the social impact of a product or service based on Product Social Impact Assessment, which is the methodology that was developed by the Roundtable. Although product social footprint may be associated with the acronym social LCA, it does not prescribe full alignment with the recommendations of the ISO 14040 norm for life-cycle assessment. Therefore we do not refer to social LCA and make the distinction to allow more flexibility for practitioners.

When should a company use quantitative product social impact assessment and when should they use a more qualitative approach?

The methodology proposed in the handbook accommodates two approaches: quantitative and scales-based. While the former is solely based on quantitative data, the latter includes both quantitative and qualitative data.

Which approach to choose will depend on what type of data is more useful to support decision making. In case of assessing a single product and aggregated data is required to support the business, the scale-based is indicated since aggregating indicators into scores in the quantitative approach is only possible in comparative assessment. Furthermore, it also depends on the type of data that is available and how the practitioner prefers working: while most social data is qualitative, people who are familiar with life cycle thinking are used to working with exact quantitative figures.



The interest for social sustainability assessment is increasing but most companies are still trying to figure out how to apply it to their situation. What would you suggest to those who would like to start such a process?

I would recommend taking one step back and revisiting the fundamentals. That includes looking at the mission of the company, what social sustainability means for the business, what are the external drivers, what is currently measured and beyond. Alternatively, the company can choose to conduct a pilot to test in practice, discover the benefits of social footprinting and what it exactly entails.

What is the main added value of social footprinting?

Social footprinting is an eye opener. When you start measuring and assessing it, you realize what you know and what you do not know about the potential social impacts of your products and services on people. It makes both positive and negative impacts measurable and visible. Another important benefit is that it can support communications and decision making at different areas of the business, including procurement, product design and community investment.

What are your future plans?

During my past five years at PRé, I've observed that companies have widely different approaches assessing the social impacts of their products and services, and for managing product social sustainability. As companies have different, specific needs, I developed an incremental programme for companies that want to start measure, manage and communicate the social footprint of their products and services. With the *Social Footprinting Programme* I hope to be able to help more companies take the next step in product social sustainability.

João Fontes is a consultant who focuses on the human element in sustainability issues. He works on projects related to sustainability assessments, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), and social sustainability. He also has experience with multi-criteria analysis, which combines social, environmental and economic indicators.

João holds a BSc in Information Technology and an MSc In Environmental Science. He started his career tailoring decision-support systems for companies in Brazil and Europe. He then worked with Far Trade in a non-profit network and as a freelance consultant. João is a member of the Measurement Science Working Group of The Sustainability Consortium, and initiated the Roundtable for Product Social Metrics. Presently, he works for PRé Sustainability and is Guest Lecturer at Harvard University Extension School.

João is the main author of the recently published Handbook for Product Social Impact Assessment.