

A new approach to sustainable construction

Keeping people at the centre of decision-making





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INTRODUCTION

When people think about sustainable construction, they usually think about energy consumption, emissions reduction, recycling and waste minimisation. It is a concept commonly associated with the environmental impact of business activities and decisions, but sustainability is also about people and society.

Social sustainability is about considering the effects of our actions on the wider community and embracing change to allow people to provide for their wellbeing now and into the future. Social wellbeing is intertwined with the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability, and influenced by many factors including health, safety, standard of living, equality, community connectedness and freedom.

The human element of sustainability is reflected in the Green Building Council of Australia's (GBCA) aspirational benchmarks for addressing the key issues of the next decade: climate action, resource efficiency, and health and wellbeing. The focus on people and society also plays a very important role in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as identified by the United Nations (UN).¹

In the design and construction industry, the social aspect of sustainability is often overlooked. Designers and specifiers place emphasis on environmentally responsible products, embodied emissions and energy efficiency, and sometimes fail to consider the broader impact of construction projects on society and individual lives.

When ethical and social considerations are brought into the design and specification process, only then can true sustainability be achieved. When choosing who to work with, the difference between two products may be vast when ethical and social considerations are brought into the equation.

In this whitepaper, we take a close look at emerging issues relating to social sustainability within the construction industry and highlight new, collaborative approaches that achieve better outcomes for people and the environment.

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Social sustainability refers to the aspects of sustainability that relate to people. The UN's SDGs provide a useful framework. The SDGs encompass social issues such as poverty, hunger, health and wellbeing, education, gender equality, decent work and dignity, inequality, and peace and justice.² The aim is to create more inclusive societies, enhance the empowerment of citizens, and build resilient communities. Linking all these issues together is the same idea that underpins human rights and social justice, that everyone is equal and that opportunities should be fairly distributed.

Social sustainability is not only important to the lives of individuals and communities, but it is also among the key Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) pillars on which companies are assessed and regulated. In the construction industry, engagement with workers, customers, suppliers, and the local community is critical

to a project's success. In fact, failure to properly engage with these stakeholders can damage business reputations and attract legal and regulatory penalties.

There are a growing number of tools to judge, measure and review the sustainability performance of businesses. For example, EcoVadis uses a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scorecard to assess how well a company or firm has integrated its CSR and sustainability practices into its business strategy and management decisions. Another example is B Corp Certification, which is a designation that a business is meeting high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency on factors from employee benefits and charitable giving to supply chain practices and input materials. Other tools to measure non-financial ESG performance include Sustainalytics' ESG Risk Ratings and the MSCI ESG Ratings.



HOW DO COMPANIES ADDRESS SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY?

Social sustainability has many dimensions, but generally companies' actions in addressing this topic fall under two broad categories. The first category relates to the company's employees and the supply chain that supports its products and services. This includes improving health and safety practices, such as providing effective, comfortable and appropriate health and safety equipment for all. Equality, diversity and inclusion policies are covered, with the aim of providing equal employment opportunities and progression for all groups without prejudice. Fair labour practices, including equal pay and working conditions, and policies against coercion and harassment, also fall into this category.

The second category relates to how a company acts in relation to the community and society. In the communities in which they conduct business, companies can seek to collaborate with local stakeholders on a variety of environmental and social issues. This could include working together on keeping the environment clean, reducing their impact on local services (e.g. water and energy), looking after others in need, and creating new economic opportunities.



KEY ISSUES IN BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION

Protection of human rights

Modern slavery refers to a range of human rights violations, but typically describes situations where coercion, threats or deception are used to exploit people and deprive them of their freedom. Examples include the trafficking of persons, the worst forms of child labour, slavery, servitude, and deceptive recruiting for labour or services, to name just a few.

The construction industry is highly susceptible to modern slavery risks due to the complex supply chains required in delivering a building project. There is a high demand for low-skilled, cheap, manual work that is physically demanding and dangerous, which has been identified as likely to be subjected to forced labour.³ Raw building materials are often sourced from countries suffering from conflict, corruption and/or a weak rule of law, increasing the risk of modern slavery violations. Moreover, multiple layers of suppliers, contractors and sub-contractors make it difficult for companies to provide effective, responsible oversight.⁴

To mitigate their exposure to modern slavery risks, companies should engage consistently with internal stakeholders, contractors, suppliers and manufacturers. A practice of meaningful collaboration with every stakeholder in the supply chain is critical as part of an organisation's broader risk management framework.

Health and safety

Construction companies and manufacturers cannot promote sustainability without protecting the health and wellbeing of their workers, as well as those who use the building after construction has been completed. A stronger commitment to health and safety as a

cornerstone of sustainability can benefit everyone involved in the construction of a new building by decreasing the number of illnesses, injuries and fatalities while also increasing their engagement and satisfaction.

Construction is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world and has a disproportionately high rate of reported accidents compared to other industries. Every year, around the world, more than 60,000 fatal and many more non-fatal injuries are reported from construction workplaces.⁵ From working at heights to moving heavy objects and machinery, the risk of injury in construction is high, meaning organisations must be constantly vigilant.

The manufacture, selection and use of building materials also play a role. There are many examples over the years of products being incorrectly installed or used in unsuitable applications, which can have devastating impact on people inhabiting the space.

An example is the devastating 2017 fire at London's Grenfell Tower. Seventy-two people died in the fire, and the disaster has highlighted the dangers of using products that don't meet the required specification for that application.

In the case of Grenfell, polyethylene-filled aluminium composite panels were to blame for the quick spread of the fire on the exterior of the building. The same material was found to be the cause of the rapid spread of fire in Melbourne's Lacrosse building in 2014.

The management of safety risks is key to integrating health and safety in a company's overall approach to sustainability. Compliance with local regulations, and detailed safety procedures and guidelines help ensure operations are safe for employees and all other stakeholders.



Building healthy and resilient communities

Another dimension of social sustainability is how the built environment affects the life of residents in a community. The GBCA describes sustainable communities as those that embody sustainable development and respect for the natural environment, while encouraging prosperity and human wellbeing and development. This definition encompasses issues such as accessibility, connectedness and future livability, especially in the face of a changing climate.⁶

A component of building healthy, resilient communities is social investment that is aligned towards the community's priorities but also towards mitigating the effects of climate change. An example of this is manufacturers investing in water reuse and conservation projects, while also reducing the impact of their operations on local water supplies. Companies can focus on locally-sourced materials and local manufacturing to help create job opportunities and support the local economy. Companies can also support projects requiring Green Star or other sustainable program certifications to help create a healthier built environment.

Collaborative strategies between companies and the communities in which they operate can help build the

community's resilience to climate change. Pursuing community environmental and biodiversity-related projects that are co-created with the local community can assist environmental sustainability as well as support the goals of climate action (e.g. helping restore local habitats to act as carbon sinks).

Another important initiative companies can take on this front is to pursue carbon neutrality underpinned by genuine emissions reduction in their operations.

Climate Active is an ongoing partnership between the Australian Government and Australian businesses to drive voluntary climate action and their carbon neutral certification is one of the most rigorous in the world.

To achieve Climate Active carbon neutral certification, businesses and organisations calculate the greenhouse gas emissions generated by their activities. After reducing these emissions as much as possible by investing in new technology or changing the way they operate, remaining emissions can be 'cancelled out' by purchasing carbon offsets. Achieving carbon neutrality by reducing emissions and investing in offsetting supports the community in mitigating the effects of climate change.

SINIAT

A collaborative approach to sustainability

When it comes to design and construction, choosing environmentally responsible products is only a start. When it comes to design and construction, choosing products based on their environmental attributes, is the starting point - attention should also be paid to social and ethical considerations.

There is a need for 'radical' collaboration throughout the entire process, demanding accountability from suppliers and manufacturers all the way through to designers, builders and owners. Choosing the right partners is a key component in delivering sustainability across all its key pillars.

Siniat is a key supply partner on thousands of construction projects around the world. The brand is renowned for providing innovative lightweight construction systems and has become a trusted partner in developing sustainable answers to the demand for more and better living spaces.

As one of the Etex Group's flagship commercial brands, Siniat shares the Group's holistic approach to sustainable development, pursuing meaningful ways to reduce their carbon footprint while placing people front and centre of their operations. This mindset embodies one of Etex's core values "Connect and Care", which acknowledges that people working together are the essential driver of a sustainable, carbon-neutral future.

Etex nurtures teamwork, communities, partnerships and new ways of working, and provides people with all the tools and skills they need to collaborate effectively. This approach is reflected in their Code of Conduct, which outlines their commitment to sustainability, the abolishment of child labour, zero discrimination and commitment to local and global communities.

As a global leader in lightweight building products, Etex wants to inspire people around the world to build living spaces that are ever more safe, sustainable, smart and beautiful. Beyond delivering high-performance and functional solutions, the company and its commercial brands foster a collaborative and caring culture, a pioneering spirit and a passion to deliver better quality living for their customers around the globe.

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