

# A Comparative Analysis of Sustainability Reporting Frameworks

Liana PARASCHIV<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines sustainability reporting within the broader context of sustainability, stakeholder theory, and the progressive adoption of non-financial disclosure. The study builds on the foundational developments in social and environmental reporting to examine key sustainability frameworks: Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the SASB Standards, and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS). Using a qualitative comparative approach, the paper evaluates these frameworks across six criteria: primary purpose and target users, scope and thematic coverage, concept of materiality, degree of standardization, regulatory status, and comparability of disclosed information. The findings highlight the coexistence of multiple frameworks, reflecting diverse stakeholder needs and conceptualizations of materiality, as well as comparability and consistency in sustainability reporting.*

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Triple Bottom Line, Corporate Social Responsibility, stakeholders, stakeholders' theory, sustainability reporting, sustainability standards.

**JEL classification:** L50, M14, M40, O16, O19, Q56

**DOI:** 10.24818/RMCI.2026.2.267

## **1. Introduction**

The role of corporations' reporting to the outside society has undergone a profound transformation, moving beyond the focus on financial performance toward a broader consideration of their social and environmental impact. This transformation can be traced back to the 1970s, to the emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), when the concept of a "social contract" between business and society became prominent. Early perspectives highlighted that corporations function with societal approval and are consequently expected to support and contribute to social welfare in parallel with economic progress. The notion of sustainability broadened this view by embedding environmental and social considerations within the development paradigm. Early influential initiatives, such as *The Limits to Growth* (1972) and the *Brundtland Report* (1987), emphasized the interdependence of economic expansion, environmental limitations, and social equity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Liana Paraschiv, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, e-mail: lianaioanaparaschiv@gmail.com

Later on, further contributions developed based on these influential initiatives, to name the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which operationalized sustainability into an applicable model for organizations, by integrating economic, environmental, and social performance dimensions into company evaluation. As corporations increasingly acknowledged their broader responsibilities, and also under stakeholders' pressure, stakeholder theory provided a conceptual basis for understanding firms as entities accountable to multiple interested actors. This evolution generated growing demand for transparency and accountability, ultimately leading to the development of sustainability reporting practices. However, the largely voluntary nature of such reporting, combined with the absence of universally accepted standards, has resulted in a fragmented landscape characterized by diverse frameworks and methodologies. In response, a range of sustainability standards and initiatives have emerged, each reflecting different scopes, target audiences, and conceptualizations of materiality. Against this background, the present study aims to provide a comparative analysis of the most prominent sustainability frameworks, to identify their key divergent and convergent areas in sustainability reporting. The analysis focuses on the most widely adopted frameworks and thus contributes to a clearer understanding of the current social, economic, and financial reporting landscape.

## **2. Literature review**

In the 1970s in the United States, a new topic - Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was formally articulated, based on the idea of a "social contract" between business and society. This perspective was advanced by the Committee for Economic Development, which framed CSR as an inherent responsibility of corporations. Recognizing the role of enterprises in "generating wealth that enhances the nation's standard of living," businesses were understood to operate with public consent, and their fundamental purpose was defined as constructively serving societal needs in a manner that ensures overall social satisfaction (Committee for Economic Development, 1971).

A significant milestone occurred later on in 1972 with the publication of the report "The Limits to Growth", commissioned by the Club of Rome. The report emphasized the interdependence of environmental, economic, and social factors, offering a transformative perspective on the consequences of unchecked growth (Meadows et al., 1972). Du Pisani (2007) argues that, following the optimism of the 1960s, when it was widely assumed that the development challenges of the Global South would be rapidly resolved through global economic expansion, the realization in the 1970s that economic growth alone was insufficient to address global inequalities led to a paradigm shift toward a redefined concept of development. Sustainability first emerged as an explicit social, environmental, and economic abstract topic.

The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” in 1987. The Commission’s objective was to establish a global framework for sustainable development. It also emphasized the interrelationship between environmental, economic, and social issues. The underlying assumption was that global ecological and social asymmetries are interconnected and must therefore be addressed holistically, by integrating the two dimensions, social and economic, into the concept of sustainability (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The definition of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) marked a significant paradigm shift for the organizational context, as sustainability evolved from a primarily theoretical concept defined earlier into a practical and operational framework, through the specific identification and articulation of the three dimensions: people, profit, and planet. TBL enabled organizations to measure and report their performance beyond traditional financial indicators. The Triple Bottom Line framework, articulated by John Elkington in 1994, emphasizes that long-term economic success is contingent upon the adequate consideration of social and environmental dimensions. By aligning these three pillars, organizations are better positioned to achieve sustainable value creation when they also support societal welfare and environmental protection. This new approach translated into the growing incorporation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles into business operations over time. Ethical responsibilities are defined as “those standards, norms, or expectations that reflect a concern for what consumers, employees, shareholders, and the broader community perceive as fair, just, or consistent with the respect for and protection of stakeholders’ moral rights.” Philanthropic responsibilities, in turn, encompass “actions or programs aimed at promoting human welfare.” (Caroll, 1991).

Early conceptualizations of sustainability emphasized the interdependence between economic, social, and environmental systems, but offered limited guidance on how organizations should translate these principles into practice. As corporations increasingly acknowledged their broader responsibilities, the stakeholder perspective—advanced by scholars such as R. Edward Freeman—provided a conceptual bridge, positioning firms as entities accountable not only to shareholders but also to a wider network of actors affected by their activities. The term “stakeholders” was first introduced in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute in 1963 to emphasize the importance of considering parties beyond shareholders in corporate decision-making processes. These “other parties” were labelled as stakeholders and included employees, customers, suppliers, creditors, and society at large (R. Edward Freeman, 1984).

According to R. Edward Freeman and John McVea (2001), the emergence of stakeholder management was driven by unprecedented levels of environmental change, prompting the development of a framework capable of addressing the concerns of managers navigating increasingly complex and dynamic business environments. R. Edward Freeman and John McVea (2001) argue that stakeholder management requires an integrated approach to strategic decision-making, whereby

managers must identify and implement ways to address the interests of multiple stakeholders simultaneously. Stakeholder Theory argues that in an organization, there are numerous and diverse participants who pursue multiple objectives that are not necessarily fully convergent (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). This shift in perspective created the need for more structured and transparent mechanisms through which organizations could demonstrate their performance across multiple dimensions.

The emergence of sustainability reporting frameworks can be understood as a direct response to these pressures exerted by stakeholders. By incorporating stakeholders' expectations into corporate governance and strategy, firms were compelled to move beyond traditional financial disclosure and develop reporting practices that capture environmental and social impacts alongside economic outcomes. Different stakeholders are now much more interested in sustainability reporting (Kolk, 2004). In this sense, sustainability reporting frameworks transform the principles of sustainability into more tangible requirements of stakeholder management.

The relationship between all these topics - the concept of sustainability, stakeholder theory, and reporting frameworks - is characterized by a reciprocal dynamic. Increasing stakeholder expectations have gradually shifted towards the demand for more comprehensive and transparent disclosure, while the formalization of reporting frameworks has, in turn, reinforced the integration of sustainability considerations into strategic decision-making processes.

The concept of sustainability reporting continued to be a current global concern, leading to variations in how different organizations conducted reporting (Mussari and Monfardini, 2010). The predominantly voluntary nature of sustainability reporting has been associated with the absence of widely accepted international standards, resulting in diverse approaches. During the 1970s, a number of social accounting models and standards were developed. In 1973, the International Accounting Standards Committee (IASC) was established through an agreement among professional accountancy bodies from the United States, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom and Ireland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, and Australia. The new body (IASC) articulated and issued the International Accounting Standards (IAS), along with related interpretations and a conceptual framework. These were looked at by many national accounting standard-setters in developing national standards.

Mobley (1970) defined socio-economic accounting as “the ordering, measuring, and analysis of the social and economic consequences of governmental and entrepreneurial behaviour. So defined, social accounting is seen as encompassing and extending present accounting. Traditional accounting has limited its concern to selected economic consequences – whether in the financial, managerial, or national income areas. Socio-economic accounting expands each of these areas to include social consequences as well as economic effects which are not presently considered”. Later on, in the 1980s, Gray et al. (1987) extended the concept of social accounting to incorporate environmental concerns as well: “the

process of communicating the social and environmental effects of organizations economic actions to particular interest groups within society and to society at large. As such, it involves extending the accountability of organizations (particularly companies), beyond the traditional role of providing a financial account to the owners of capital, in particular, shareholders. Such an extension is predicated upon the assumption that companies do have wider responsibilities than simply to make money for their shareholders". Although not based on empirical evidence, Gray (1988) pioneered the idea of the relationship between "identified cultural characteristics and the development of accounting systems, the regulation of the accounting profession and attitudes towards financial management and disclosure". In 2001, the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) succeeded the IASC, with a mandate to promote the convergence of national accounting standards through the development of globally accepted accounting standards. The IASB has since continued the standard-setting process under the designation "International Financial Reporting Standards" (IFRS). In 2002, the European Union (EU) decided that, effective from 1 January 2005, IFRS would apply for the consolidated accounts of the EU listed companies, bringing about the introduction of IFRS to many large entities. Other countries have since followed the lead of the EU.

In 2021, on the occasion of COP26 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow, the IFRS Foundation announced the formation of the new International Sustainability Standards Board ISSB, which became responsible for the SASB Standards.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to analyze the key sustainability reporting frameworks at the international level. The assessment is grounded on the evaluation of the following selected standards: the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the SASB Standards, and the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), which have been identified due to their widespread adoption, institutional relevance, and influence on current reporting practices.

The comparative framework is constructed around six analytical criteria:

- (1) primary purpose and target users,
- (2) scope and thematic coverage,
- (3) concept of materiality,
- (4) degree of standardization,
- (5) regulatory status, and
- (6) comparability of disclosed information.

These criteria were selected to capture both conceptual and practical dimensions of sustainability reporting, enabling a systematic assessment of how different frameworks address stakeholder needs, define relevant information, and structure disclosure requirements.

Data for the analysis are derived from official publications and websites of these institutions related to each framework. The study relies on interpretive analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and divergences across standards. The methodology seeks to provide analytical insights into the current configuration of sustainability reporting systems. The qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the underlying principles and assumptions embedded within each framework, particularly concerning scope, audience, materiality definitions, and comparability. At the same time, it facilitates the identification of broader trends, such as the increasing shift toward regulatory standardization and the convergence between financial and sustainability reporting. This methodological design is appropriate given the conceptual nature of the research and the absence of a single, unified reporting model.

#### **4. Sustainability Standards: A Comparative Analysis**

As societal concerns expanded beyond purely financial considerations, sustainability reporting initiatives emerged, to mention the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in 2002, which became one of the most widely adopted sustainability reporting standards, reporting of environmental, economic and social impacts. Reporting methodologies continued to evolve, driven by an increasing recognition of the interconnection between financial performance and broader impacts on society and the environment.

The Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), established in 2000, became a global disclosure platform through which companies report their environmental impacts, particularly in relation to carbon emissions, forests, water usage, plastics, and biodiversity.

The SASB Standards, developed in 2011, introduced industry-specific standards focused on financially material sustainability issues. Its primary objective is to support companies in disclosing sustainability information for investors' decisions.

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted, comprising 17 interconnected objectives addressing key dimensions of sustainable development, including, among others, education, poverty reduction, gender equality, affordable and clean energy, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, sustainable urban development, responsible consumption and production, climate action, and biodiversity conservation. One specific aspect of these goals is that they are interconnected: advancement in one area influences another.

In 2023, the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) were adopted; they are designed for application by companies subject to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). These standards encompass a comprehensive range of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) topics, such as human rights, climate change, and biodiversity. Furthermore, ESRS argue that they are taking into consideration ongoing alignment efforts with the International

Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), ensuring a high degree of interoperability between European and international frameworks while reducing the risk of duplicative reporting.

A comparative analysis of the main sustainability frameworks and standards (SDGs, GRI, SASB, CDP, ESRS,) across the specified criteria is presented below.

### **1. Primary purpose and target users**

The SDGs are global policy goals aimed at governments, NGOs, and organizations broadly, serving as a strategic reference rather than a reporting standard. However, big, global private players refer to these standards in their sustainability reports. GRI states that it emphasizes transparency in reporting economic, environmental, and social impacts, while targeting a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including investors, civil society, and regulators. SASB is oriented towards investors and provides them with financially material sustainability information. Standards are specific to each industry, aiming to enhance decision-useful disclosures. CDP serves investors, companies, and policymakers by facilitating environmental disclosure through a standardized platform. Reporting entities comprise companies (including small and medium-sized enterprises) that are requested to disclose by CDP Capital Market Signatories or Supply Chain members, as well as self-selected companies that report voluntarily without a formal request. The scope also includes cities, states, and regions, and public authorities. ESRS is primarily aimed at investors and regulators within the EU, ensuring consistent corporate sustainability disclosures. It integrates both perspectives, targeting investors while also addressing broader stakeholder concerns within a regulatory framework.

### **2. Scope and thematic coverage**

The SDGs have the broadest scope, covering all dimensions of sustainable development (social, environmental, and economic). GRI provides comprehensive coverage across ESG dimensions, allowing organizations flexibility in selecting relevant topics. SASB Standards are narrower, focusing on industry-specific sustainability issues that are financially material. SASB Standards offers more focused, industry-specific metrics, limiting scope but increasing relevance for investors. Sustainability is classified into five main categories in the SASB Standards: leadership and governance, business model and innovation, social capital, human capital, and environment. There is autonomy for companies regarding which standards should be applied, which disclosure concepts should be addressed, and which corresponding metrics should be disclosed, while considering relevant legal requirements. CDP concentrates on environmental themes, particularly climate, water, forests, plastics, and biodiversity. ESRS offers comprehensive ESG coverage, including climate, biodiversity, social issues, and governance. ESRS combines breadth and structure, covering a wide range of ESG topics with detailed requirements.

### **3. Concept of materiality**

The SDGs do not explicitly define materiality; they function as broad societal priorities. GRI applies a double materiality perspective, considering both impact on society/environment and relevance to stakeholders. SASB Standards uses a strict financial materiality lens, focusing on issues that affect enterprise value. CDP aligns largely with environmental and investor-relevant materiality, though less formally defined. ESRS explicitly adopts double materiality, integrating both impact and financial perspectives. Double materiality means that companies have to report not only on how sustainability issues might create financial risks for the company (financial materiality), but also regarding the impact that the company has on people and the environment (impact materiality) (European Commission, 2022).

### **4. Degree of standardization**

The SDGs provide high-level goals with low technical standardization. GRI offers structured standards, with flexibility in application, being structured as a modular system of interrelated components. The reporting process is supported by three sets of Standards: the GRI Universal Standards, applicable to all organizations; the GRI Sector Standards, designed for specific industries; and the GRI Topic Standards, each outlining disclosure associated with a particular subject area. SASB provides highly standardized, industry-specific metrics. CDP uses standardized questionnaires through its specific platform, and responses can vary in depth. ESRS is highly standardized, with detailed disclosure requirements and metrics. The ESRS framework consists of two cross-cutting standards and ten topical standards, encompassing a total of 160 disclosure requirements, each supported by specific datapoints and application guidance. The cross-cutting standards—ESRS 1: General Requirements and ESRS 2: General Disclosures—apply to all entities reporting under ESRS, regardless of the results of the materiality assessment. The above mentioned ten topical standards are categorized into three main clusters —environmental, social, and governance—and address distinct sustainability areas, reflecting domains that may be affected by an organization’s activities.

### **5. Regulatory status**

The SDGs are voluntary and non-binding, and GRI, SASB, and CDP are all voluntary frameworks. ESRS is mandatory within the EU for companies under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).

### **6. Comparability of disclosed information**

The SDGs provide limited comparability due to their broad and non-standardized nature. GRI allows moderate comparability, as flexibility in standards can reduce consistency across reports. SASB enables high comparability due to industry-specific standardized metrics. SASB enhances comparability within industries but not across them. CDP provides relatively high comparability

through structured questionnaires, although responses can vary in depth. ESRS ensures very high comparability due to mandatory, harmonized standards.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that sustainability reporting has evolved from early conceptual discussions on social and environmental accountability into a complex, practical, and multi-layered system of frameworks and standards. This evolution reflects broader changes in the role of corporations, the growing importance of stakeholder engagement, and the increasing recognition of the interconnectedness between financial performance and societal impact.

The analysis also highlights that each framework reflects specific priorities and use cases. The ongoing challenge lies in balancing flexibility with comparability. The comparative analysis reveals a fundamental difference and scope between stakeholder-oriented and investor-oriented frameworks. While GRI prioritizes accountability for societal impact, SASB focuses on financial decision-making. ESRS represents an attempt to reconcile these approaches by embedding both perspectives into a single regulatory system specific to the European context. The coexistence of multiple frameworks creates challenges for companies, including reporting complexity and potential duplication. For users of ESG information, particularly investors, inconsistencies in metrics and definitions complicate cross-company comparisons. The current reporting landscape is characterized by both diversity and gradual convergence. While significant differences persist in purpose, materiality, and methodology, regulatory developments, particularly in the European Union, are driving standardization efforts.

While initiatives such as the SDGs provide a broad normative foundation, others, such as SASB Standards, focus on investor-oriented, financially material information. In contrast, GRI and ESRS adopt a broader stakeholder perspective, incorporating the principle of double materiality. Among the analyzed frameworks, ESRS stands out as the most comprehensive and standardized, reflecting a shift toward mandatory and harmonized reporting within the European Union.

Despite these advancements, the coexistence of multiple frameworks continues to pose challenges for comparability and consistency. Differences in materiality concepts, levels of standardization, and thematic focus that create a fragmented reporting landscape may limit the usefulness of disclosed information for stakeholders. At the same time, ongoing efforts toward interoperability—particularly between ESRS, GRI, and emerging global standards—indicate a trend toward greater alignment.

While full convergence has not yet been achieved, the increasing institutionalization of standards suggests that greater comparability and transparency may be attainable in the future. The study is based primarily on conceptual and institutional documentation rather than empirical data. As a result, it does not assess how these frameworks are implemented in practice, nor does it evaluate the quality, reliability, or actual comparability of disclosures produced by companies. Further research may explore the practical implications of these developments, particularly in terms of implementation challenges and their impact on corporate behavior and decision-making.

## References

1. Carroll, A. B. (1991). *The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders*. *Business Horizons*, 34\*(4), 39-48.
2. CDP. (2026). How to disclose. <https://www.cdp.net/en/disclose/how-to-disclose>
3. Committee for Economic Development. (1971, June). *Social responsibilities of business corporations: A statement by the Research and Policy Committee*.
4. Donaldson, T. & Preston, L. E. (1995). The stakeholder theory of the corporation: Concepts, evidence, and implications. *Academy of Management Review*, 20\*(1), 65-91. [<https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1995.9503271992>]
5. Du Pisani, J. A. (2006). Sustainable development – Historical roots of the concept. *Environmental Sciences*, 3\*(2), 83-96. [<https://doi.org/10.1080/15693430600688831>]
6. Elkington, J. (1994). Toward the sustainable corporation: Win-win-win business strategies for sustainable development. *California Management Review*, 36\*(2), 90-100. [<https://doi.org/10.2307/41165746>]
7. European Commission. (2022, July 26). *Sustainable finance: Political agreement on Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive will improve the way firms report sustainability information*. <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/fisma/items/754701/en>
8. European Financial Reporting Advisory Group. (2023). *EFRAG ESRS knowledge hub*. <https://knowledgehub.efrag.org/>
9. Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston, MA: Pitman.
10. Freeman, R. E. & McVea, J. F. (2001). A stakeholder approach to strategic management. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. [<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.263511>]
11. Gray, R., Owen, D. & Adams, C. (1996). *Accounting and Accountability: Changes and Challenges in Corporate*
12. Gray, S.J. (1988). *Towards a Theory of Cultural Influence on the Development of Accounting Systems Internationally*. *Abacus*, 24, 1-15. Social and Environmental Reporting, Prentice-Hall Europe, London, GRI 101: Foundation 2016, p. 10.
13. Global Reporting Initiative. (n.d.). GRI standards (English language). <https://www.globalreporting.org/how-to-use-the-gri-standards/gri-standards-english-language/>
14. IFRS Foundation. (n.d.). International financial reporting standards. <https://iaefinance.org/wp-content/uploads/International-Financial-Reporting-Standards.pdf>
15. IFRS Foundation. (n.d.). Understanding SASB standards. <https://www.ifrs.org/issued-standards/sasb-standards/understanding-sasb-standards/>
16. Kolk, Ans. (2004). More than words? An analysis of sustainability reports. *New Academy Review*. 3.
17. Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J. & Behrens, W. W. (1972). *Limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. Universe Books.
18. Mobley, S.C. (1970). "The Challenges of Socio-Economic Accounting", *The Accounting Review*, October, pp.762-768. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/244213>
19. Mussari, R. & Monfardini, P. Practices of Social Reporting in Public Sector and Non-Profit Organizations. *Public Manag. Rev.* 2010, 12, 487-492.
20. World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford University Press.