

Social LCA – Requirements and needs
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The importance of the integration of social aspects in the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) frame is of common knowledge. Yet researchers have not agreed to a standard method to put this into practice. This can be explained by the restrictions posed to both sides. On the one hand, the selection of social indicators to provide a social profile of a product, a process or a system should follow a series of criteria such as impartiality and relevance in order to measure the promotion of employment, the improvement of living and working conditions, safety at work, etc. On the other hand, in social LCA other aspects need to be taken into consideration: product/process-relatedness, system boundaries, cut-off criteria, etc. If only the indicators that follow both criteria are selected, relevant social problems may be left aside. If all the socially relevant problems are taken into consideration, they might not fit into the LCA frame and therefore the three aspects of the life cycle sustainability analysis – environment, economy and society – cannot be represented together.

At the moment these two different approaches are reflected by most of the methods available: either social indicators are considered apart or only indicators that fit to the LCA frame are analyzed. An interesting approach of this latter is the Life Cycle Working Environment Methodology (LCWE), in which a selection of indicators are grouped and quantified in working seconds for each product/process. Using this reference unit, different social problems still keep the product/process-relatedness. Since there is still no international consensus, which indicators are the most appropriate ones to represent the social profile of a system, this can be seen as a first approach.

However the hindrances mentioned above still remain. In order to give a complete picture of the reality, a combination of both sets of requirements, social and LCA, is needed. Only in this way we can assure that relevant social impacts related to the product/system under study are considered properly. Social indicators should be chosen according to the specific social needs and then adapted to the LCA frame. It should not be the LCA that dictates the rules for the choice of social indicators.

In this way, the requirements of each field social and LCA will be presented and based on them, the difficulties in integrating both areas are discussed. Taking the LCWE methodology as a reference, these points can be concretely shown.