

# AN ASSOCIATION'S SOCIAL PURPOSE: A BENCHMARKING TOOL

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## Introduction

Associations exist to serve their members and many associations also exist to serve broader society and the greater public good. This tool lays out the opportunity for all associations to consider serving society in addition to serving their members and sets out a roadmap for all associations to enhance their social and environmental programs. This will help sectors, professions and members become future-fit and ensure long-term well-being for all within nature's limits.

The Association Social Purpose Benchmarking Tool is a tool for associations to assess their readiness and interest in accelerating their social and environmental practices and consider becoming a social purpose association. Organizations can use the "Social Purpose Association Continuum" to decide where they want to be, how much more they want to do, and whether it is in their mandate to advance along the levels set out in the Continuum.

It captures a range of practices: from basic and opportunistic, to strategic and targeted, then visionary and collaborative, and finally, to the social purpose and transformational stage. Each range represents a level – one through four – enabling organizations to better envision how far they would like to advance in their approach to becoming – or fulfilling their role as – a social purpose association.

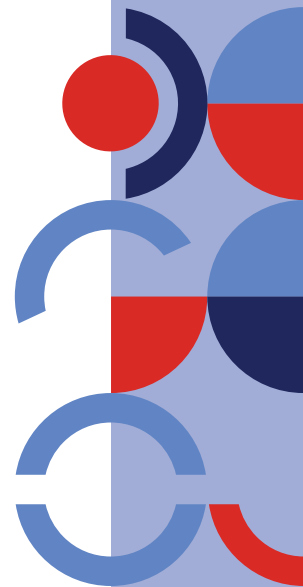
The Continuum is illustrative and not definitive, providing descriptions of different practices that are demonstrative of a developmental stage. Organizations typically have practices in more than one column and these practices will likely cluster around one or another level.

While the Continuum may not fully apply to smaller organizations, it is certainly possible for smaller associations to make advances on all levels. Progressing to higher levels is possible, as not all require intensive resources and inputs. Likewise, the Continuum may also be useful as a tool to understand which practices in the other levels might be possible to achieve through partnership and collaboration.

**Your association could ask: Is this where we want to be? What do we aspire to?  
The resulting discussion will be beneficial in developing a framework to guide your approach and help inform your strategic plan and identity as an association.**

## Social Purpose Association Continuum

**Instruction:** Review these practices to identify what stage your association is at, first in terms of ESG and then in terms of social purpose. Then, consider if you would like to take your organization to the next level and/or what level makes most sense at this time. (ESG refers to environmental, social and governance practices. Alternative terms include sustainability, CSR (corporate social responsibility), as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)).



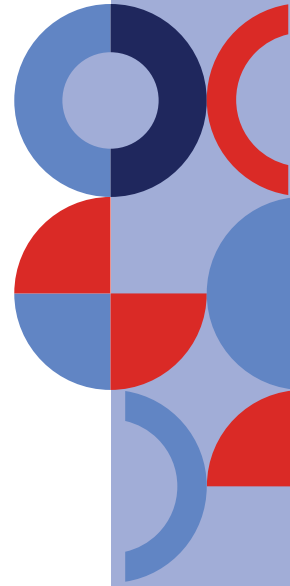
Practice Area	Level 1 Basic and Opportunistic	Level 2 Strategic and Targeted	Level 3 Visionary and Collaborative	Level 4 Social Purpose and Transformational
Operations and Strategy	Includes ESG practices in its operations (i.e., improves its own social and environmental impacts)	Adopts ESG principles, policies, and definitions, and includes ESG in organization's values and workplan  Uses an ESG lens in decisions and projects	Develops and adopts ESG vision, goals, targets for members to pursue together, and includes them in organization's strategy	Adopts a societal [social] purpose as the reason the association/ sector/ profession exists. Updates its vision and values to reflect its societal [social] purpose  The association's strategy includes societal goals, targets and metrics for the association and the sector / profession to pursue together
Knowledge and Capacity	Provides ESG information and education and includes ESG in member communications  Offers ESG related awards and honours  Shares ESG case studies, success stories, tips, and tools	Provides information on ESG trends and risks to members  Develops and shares ESG toolkits and guidelines  Collects member ESG data and monitors ESG performance / progress of members and association	Develops ESG standards, benchmarks, designations, curriculum, rating systems and codes of practice	Requires members to participate in ESG program / training as a condition of membership  Requires member ESG performance to be verified or assured by a third-party  Provides education on the business case, benefits, examples, and rationale for members to become purpose-driven  Offers social purpose awards  Develops toolkits and guidelines on social purpose and the role of members / the sector or profession as social purpose actors
Member Engagement	Establishes time limited ESG task forces for members to provide input; consults members on priorities	Creates longer-term ESG working groups for members to research and learn about ESG topics together	Creates ESG working groups for members to collaborate on ESG issues that can only be tackled through collective action	Supports its members to provide solutions to ESG / society's challenges

Practice Area	Level 1 Basic and Opportunistic	Level 2 Strategic and Targeted	Level 3 Visionary and Collaborative	Level 4 Social Purpose and Transformational
Government and Stakeholders	Engages in positive ESG advocacy with one or more levels of government	Initiates and engages in strategic ESG partnerships with government and other stakeholders	Initiates and engages in multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborations to tackle ESG challenges  Conducts joint ESG R&D and pilots with value chain partners/ allied groups  Engages with aligned associations to advance collective ESG progress of sectors / professions	Initiates coalitions to advocate for government ESG leadership  Engages other associations to address ESG / societal issues together; mobilizes other sectors / professions on ESG  Initiates and participates in collaborations with aligned associations in all jurisdictions to advance ESG and societal progress of sector / profession  Conducts government advocacy seeking measures to create the enabling conditions that advance a Purpose Economy <sup>1</sup>
Public Communications	Profiles ESG related materials on its website	Provides ESG voice of sector / profession	Discloses ESG performance of sector / profession in annual reports	Inspires member and public action on ESG
Staffing	No designated ESG staff	Designated lead ESG staff	ESG designation on the leadership team; ESG related training provided to key staff members	CEO is ESG and social purpose leader; all staff have ESG and social purpose responsibilities

## What is a Social Purpose Association?

A social purpose association is an association whose raison d'être is to create a better world and be a positive force in society. Its social purpose North Star sets out why the association exists – the greater good it aspires to. It goes beyond a mission statement (what it does or how it does it), and a vision (where it is headed). It is the association's quest, enduring reason for being, forever pursued. A social purpose association serves society, in addition to serving its members.

<sup>1</sup> A Purpose Economy is an economy powered by the pursuit of long-term well-being for all in which business and regulatory and financial systems foster an equitable, flourishing, resilient future.



## Why Become a Social Purpose Association?

These are some of the benefits of becoming a social purpose association.

Enhance relevance with members, stakeholders, and society	Create a future-fit organization and profession / sector	Address rising expectations of investors, clients, donors, customers, and employees
Build public trust of sector / profession	Attract and engage members and partners; leverage our reach and influence	Demonstrate sector / profession leadership; raise association brand and profile

## What is the Difference Between a Mission, Vision, and Purpose?

Many associations have pre-existing mission and mandate statements under which they have successfully operated for many years. The transition to becoming a purpose-driven association involves a decision to determine “why” the organization exists and “why” the organization is focused on its current mandate. Leading organizations are uncovering their core purpose and using this to set their strategic course. Here is how a purpose fits into the current framework:

- **Mission:** What your organization does and how it does it.
- **Vision:** Where your organization is headed.
- **Social Purpose:** The societal reason your organization exists.

## How to Determine a Social Purpose for Your Organization?

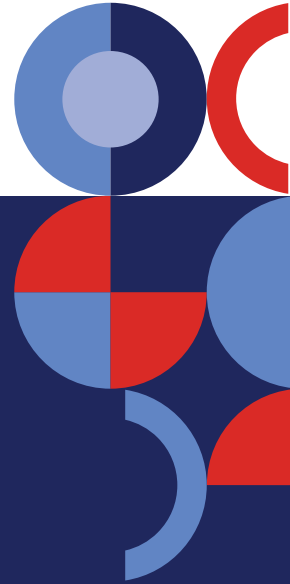
Here are some questions you can use in a strategy session to brainstorm the societal reason your association exists:

- What **greater role** do you believe our association can play in the world?
- How might we contribute to the **greater good** through our association?
- What is the **societal benefit** of our sector/profession? How does our sector/profession benefit humanity/the world?

## What are the Implications of Becoming a Social Purpose Association?

These are some of the ways in which becoming a social purpose association might affect your organization:

- **It will inform strategy:** The organization sets strategic goals and deliverables to further its social purpose.
- **It will inform culture:** It shapes how the organization behaves.
- **It will inform decisions:** It becomes a lens in decision-making, helps set strategic priorities and guides daily decisions.
- **It will inform partnerships:** The organization partners and collaborates with others in its ecosystem to further its social purpose.



## About the Author

Coro Strandberg is the President of Strandberg Consulting and the Chair of the Canadian Purpose Economy Project. She is a nationally recognized leader in corporate sustainability, social purpose and ESG (environment, social and governance) and social purpose governance. Coro is a sought-after speaker and advisor to boards and executive teams on these topics. She is a faculty member for Director's College and Governance Professionals of Canada where she trains Directors and Governance Professionals on ESG, Sustainability and Purpose Governance. She has over 20 years of corporate governance experience and is currently on the board of British Columbia Lottery Corporation. Coro publishes her research and thought leadership on her website at [www.corostrandberg.com](http://www.corostrandberg.com)

## About the Canadian Purpose Economy Project

The Canadian Purpose Economy Project exists to accelerate the transition to the purpose economy. It engages national ecosystem actors to create an enabling environment for social purpose businesses to start, transition, thrive and grow. It convenes, connects, curates, and collaborates to drive the social purpose business movement in Canada toward an economy where social purpose business is the norm, attracting capital, talent, and partners. In this economy businesses unlock all their assets, influence, reach and scale in collaboration with others to help Canada address its societal challenges and realize a flourishing future. Register for updates here [www.purposeeconomy.ca](http://www.purposeeconomy.ca)