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A Code of Ethics for the social performance profession

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ABSTRACT

I advocate for the establishment of a Code of Ethics for social performance professionals, particularly in the extractive and energy industries where faster and more production is essential for the energy transition. Demand for social performance practitioners is increasing. As the profession evolves, it faces significant challenges due to a lack of standardised qualifications and frameworks. In this opinion piece, I underscore the critical role social performance professionals play in advising corporate decision-making and the necessity for professionalisation of the field. A Code of Ethics recognises three unique aspects of social performance practice that demand specific ethical guidance: multi-stakeholder accountability, complex power dynamics, and consideration of long-term impacts. The concept of ethical maturity in practitioners' decision-making processes is discussed, and a set of ethical principles proposed, illustrated with practical scenarios. I conclude by emphasising that a well-defined Code of Ethics is essential for building a profession that is valued for its accountability, integrity and culture of ethics. Dialogue among practitioners and stakeholders is crucial to ensure that the code reflects the complexities of social performance practice and contributes to responsible business practices.

1. Introduction: a Code of Ethics for social performance practitioners is urgently needed

The extractive industries are confronted by how to balance more and faster mineral production, driven by the energy transition, with responsible engagement of local communities. Social performance practitioners play a critical role in that they serve as vital intermediaries between companies and communities, navigating complex relationships and decisions that significantly impact lives and livelihoods. Demand for these social performance practitioners is increasing.

Social performance has been defined as “how well a company or project does in terms of all its interactions with local communities, especially in relation to meeting the objectives of avoiding harm, having trusting relationships, and contributing to equitable conditions by which host communities and the company can attain their development aspirations” (Esteves and Moreira, 2021, p.1). Individuals who have social performance as their primary responsibility can be employed by a project developer, engaged as consultants to advise the project, or employed by a financial institution that finances the project. Social performance practitioners are given a variety of job titles, and can work in all sectors that develop projects that potentially might impact people and local communities, including: extractives, energy, forestry, agri-business, infrastructure, manufacturing and conservation. Their practice is evolving within a backdrop of a rapidly changing context,

increasing stakeholder expectations and regulatory pressures, and a growing recognition of the importance of responsible business conduct.

Social performance is a field of practice but has not yet established itself as a profession. Yet, its increasing recognition, demand for expertise, and the growth in training programs point to a trajectory toward professionalisation. As an emerging profession, social performance would benefit from more formalisation and the development of standards for expected behaviours, including a Code of Ethics. The absence of a formalised Code of Ethics tailored to social performance practice poses substantial risks - not only to community rights and wellbeing but also to the ethical integrity of companies. Without ethical frameworks to guide decisions, practitioners often face dilemmas that challenge their ability to know how to act in the best interests of the multiple stakeholders they serve.

I make the case for the urgent establishment of a Code of Ethics for social performance professionals. Having a code would enable a space for ‘reasoned dialogue’, ultimately enhancing credibility of the profession, fostering accountability, and protecting community rights in accordance with a just transition. I propose a set of ethical principles that would define such a code. Justifications for the principles are offered by showing how, through the application of a code, the social performance profession can significantly enhance its effectiveness and contribute to the wellbeing of the communities it engages with. I also raise considerations for the implementation of a Code of Ethics,

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including overcoming organisational hurdles, rigidity and the risk of compliance over genuine ethical engagement.

2. A Code of Ethics will strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness of social performance practice

Numerous trends are giving impetus to the emerging profession of social performance. Over the last decade, there has been significant emphasis on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria in corporate decision-making. Companies are increasingly integrating ESG factors into their business strategies, recognising that these elements are crucial for long-term success and risk management. Governments and regulatory bodies are implementing policies that mandate corporate responsibility and sustainability practices that address social risks to communities from development projects (World Bank 2024). Compliance with these regulations is becoming integral to corporate strategy.

Global trends such as 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' (DEI) and the 'Just Transition' have heightened awareness of social justice issues, compelling companies to address equity and social inclusion within their operations and supply chains. This reflects a broader societal shift towards corporate accountability.

The demand for transparency in corporate practices has led to the rise of sustainability reporting frameworks, such as the voluntary Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the mandatory European Union's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). Companies are expected to provide detailed disclosures on their social, human rights and environmental impacts.

Although social performance has existed as a field of practice for decades, it is still not a fully established profession. Practitioners in social performance come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, such as communications, social sciences, environmental studies, earth sciences, engineering and law. This diversity reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field, as well as the lack of degree courses that focus specifically on social performance. Unlike established professions (e.g., law, medicine), social performance lacks standardised qualifications, certification, and a regulatory body. This makes it difficult to regard social performance as a formal profession. Another hindrance is that the roles within social performance can vary significantly between organisations, leading to inconsistencies in job titles, responsibilities, and expectations. Issues related to professionalisation are well-known (see for example: [Zandvliet and Anderson, 2009](#); [Kemp 2010](#); [Kemp and Owen, 2013, 2018, 2019, 2020](#); [Owen and Kemp 2014, 2017](#); [Cochrane, 2017](#); [Katz, 2020](#); [Esteves and Moreira, 2021](#); [Maas and Coakes, 2024](#); [Vanclay and Esteves, 2024](#)).

The establishment of professional organisations and networks focused on social performance (such as the Social Practice Forum, the International Association for Impact Assessment, and the CEnvP's Social Impact Assessment Certification scheme) is indicative of a movement towards professionalisation. These entities aim to create resources, training, and certification opportunities for practitioners (CEnvP, 2022; ICMM, 2022; [Maas and Coakes, 2024](#)). Frameworks for conducting ethical social research have been proposed in the International Association for Impact Assessment's journal ([Baines et al., 2013](#), [Vanclay et al., 2013](#)). The emergence of academic programs and courses dedicated to social performance topics also suggests a shift towards professionalisation, providing practitioners with formal training and credentials (see for example the SIAhub training database: <https://www.socialimpactassessment.com/training/>).

As the demand for more extractives and renewable energy projects increases, and with stakeholders increasingly demanding transparency and accountability, the need for specialised expertise in social performance is rising. This demand is expected to drive the development of more structured career paths and professional standards. However, professionalisation faces a number of challenges. For instance, the absence of universally accepted principles and frameworks for social performance makes it difficult to establish consistent practices and

benchmarks. The multidisciplinary nature of social performance requires a wide range of skills, including knowledge of stakeholder engagement, social sciences, environmental science, and business strategy. This breadth of necessary skills can hamper training and certification efforts. There are still relatively few formal educational programs or certifications specifically focused on social performance. This lack of dedicated training opportunities can result in a workforce that is not adequately prepared for the complexities of the field.

Another challenge presents itself in how different companies prioritise social performance to varying degrees. Inconsistent commitment from leadership can lead to a lack of resources and support for professional development within the field. Social performance is often viewed as a secondary or optional function rather than as a core business imperative. This perception can limit investment in professionalisation efforts and career development. Many companies prioritise short-term financial gains over long-term social responsibility, which can limit investment in social performance initiatives and the professional development of practitioners. Economic downturns can divert attention and resources away from social performance efforts, making it challenging to build a robust professional community.

The lack of comprehensive research and data on best practices and effective strategies in social performance has also hindered the development of evidence-based approaches and professional standards. I believe that this and the challenges described above can be addressed if social performance practice is seen by stakeholders as having legitimacy and effectiveness in contributing to responsible business practices. A Code of Ethics will contribute to this end.

3. The complex advisory role of social performance practice brings unique ethical considerations

The social performance practitioner's role is inherently complex, operating not in a binary space between company and community, but in a multi-dimensional arena where various interests intersect. Rather than inhabiting a higher moral ground, practitioners navigate a complex ethical landscape where they must balance multiple legitimate interests and rights. Their effectiveness stems not from moral superiority but from their capacity to understand, translate between, and work with different perspectives, interests, and needs. This positioning requires sophisticated ethical judgment, as practitioners must often navigate situations where there is no clear 'right' answer, but rather a need to find workable solutions that respect multiple rights and interests.

The tension between reflexive and assertive approaches to community engagement identified by [Parsons and Luke \(2020\)](#) is an example of how the complexity plays out. While reflexive approaches emphasize genuine dialogue and mutual understanding and align more closely with practitioners' perspectives of ethical practice, practitioners often face organizational pressure to adopt more assertive approaches that promise quicker results. Social performance practitioners must find a methodology that 'works' in the ambiguous space in between multiple objectives.

Social performance practitioners tend to operate as advisors to decision-makers within complex organizational and stakeholder systems. In other words, they are all consultants: some work internally and some are external consultants or contractors. As [Block \(2023\)](#) emphasizes in his consulting 'bible', a consultant's effectiveness lies in their ability to influence without direct power. This resonates with the role of social performance practitioners who must influence decisions and practices while often lacking direct authority over operational outcomes.

The consulting lens provides valuable insights into understanding the nuanced position of social performance practitioners. There are three fundamental roles that consultants play: expert, pair-of-hands, and collaborative ([Block, 2023](#)). Practitioners frequently shift between these roles:

- As experts, they bring specialized knowledge of e.g. social performance standards, stakeholder engagement, and human rights frameworks;
- In the pair-of-hands role, they might implement specific engagement or assessment tasks; and
- As collaborators, they work alongside operational teams to develop and implement social performance strategies.

This multi-faceted positioning, as well as simultaneous accountability to multiple stakeholders, places the consultant in a potentially vulnerable position to ethical dilemmas. Social performance practitioners face this vulnerability acutely, being accountable to: their employing organization or client; affected communities and stakeholders; their professional peers; their own ethical principles; and industry standards and expectations.

Block terms "flawless consulting" as the ability to maintain authenticity and speak truth to power while building collaborative relationships (Block, 2023). For social performance practitioners, this might mean: delivering unwelcome messages about community concerns; challenging organizational assumptions about social impacts; advocating for resources or time needed for proper stakeholder dialogue; or raising ethical concerns about proposed actions or decisions.

The inference is that this requires social performance practitioners to, at a minimum, clearly define their role and its limitations, and be competent in building influence through expertise and relationships rather than formal authority, as well as navigating competing interests and expectations. It also calls for maintaining professional independence while working within organizational constraints.

While all advisory professions grapple with maintaining independence, social performance practitioners face distinct challenges. One similarity with the legal profession is that both require professional independence while being paid by clients, as well as confidentiality. A difference lies in lawyers having a clear primary duty to clients, compared with social performance practitioners having to balance multiple stakeholders. Compared with the medical profession, there is a similarity in the ethical obligation to do no harm, and the need to apply professional judgment. However, there are differences when it comes to the individual vs. collective focus, and consideration of the temporal scope of impacts. Management consulting is another advisory role that is similar in that it considers the organisational context, however this does not extend to broader stakeholder accountability or long-term community impacts.

Maintaining professional independence when consulting requires clear role definition, professional objectivity, ethical consistency, and awareness of boundaries regarding limitations and control. These are not unique to social performance practice. There are, however, three unique aspects of social performance practice that demand specific ethical guidance:

- *Multi-stakeholder accountability*: Unlike other professions, social performance practitioners must maintain independence while serving: their employing organization, affected communities, broader society, and future generations.
- *Complex power dynamics*: For social performance practitioners, this involves: navigating corporate-community power imbalances; maintaining independence while building trust; speaking truth to power effectively; and balancing competing interests.
- *Long-term impacts*: Social performance decisions often have inter-generational implications, requiring practitioners to: consider long-term consequences; maintain independence in face of short-term pressures; document decisions and rationale; and build sustainable solutions.

4. A Code of Ethics will help in making difficult moral decisions

Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development provides a

perspective that strengthens the case for a Code of Ethics. Moral reasoning is categorised into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. The theory has faced criticism, particularly regarding a gender and cultural bias in the way it was developed. It is nonetheless a useful heuristic for thinking about maturity levels of moral reasoning and showing how different levels of moral reasoning might apply in social performance practice.

At the pre-conventional level, moral reasoning is driven primarily by self-interest and the avoidance of punishment. Decisions made solely at this level often prioritise immediate gains, which can lead to unethical practices if they serve personal or organisational benefits. This level lacks a broader understanding of social responsibility, making it insufficient for guiding practitioners who are expected to consider the long-term impacts of their actions on communities and stakeholders.

Indications that social performance practitioners may be operating at the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning are found in transactional approaches to community relations, where actions are taken purely to avoid conflict or secure immediate benefits.

The next level, the conventional level, recognises societal norms and the expectations of others, but it often prioritises conformity and maintaining relationships. Practitioners operating at this level may comply with organisational policies, financial institution standards, or promote that they are protecting both company and community interests. However, they do so without critically evaluating the ethical implications of their actions. Take the example of a social performance team that has a culture that prioritises making decisions based on consensus. Or, when they promote uncritical attainment of 'social license to operate' as an end in itself simply because this is the goal desired by senior leadership.

In contrast, the post-conventional level emphasises universal ethical principles and individual rights. Practitioners at this level are guided by a commitment to justice, equality, and the wellbeing of all stakeholders, transcending mere adherence to laws or organisational norms. This stage encourages critical thinking and ethical reasoning, allowing practitioners to navigate complex moral dilemmas. Practitioners integrate multiple levels of moral reasoning: company policies; professional standards; local cultural norms; universal principles; and practical constraints.

Consider a situation where a practitioner must decide whether to accept traditional gifts from community leaders. The company has a no-gift policy based on anti-corruption principles. Local culture views gift-giving as essential to relationship-building. The practitioner must consider: corporate governance requirements; cultural respect and relationships; transparency and accountability; and long-term implications for trust-building. They must also consider alternative ways to honour both sets of values.

Working at the post-conventional level means acknowledging that there are multiple valid approaches. Different approaches might be equally ethical but suited to different contexts. It may be the case that following company policy might actually reflect sophisticated moral reasoning. There may also be recognition that cultural considerations affect what constitutes ethical behaviour. Practical constraints also shape ethical choices. Different cultures might view moral reasoning differently: Western frameworks might not fully apply in all contexts, local ethical frameworks need consideration and universal principles might need local interpretation.

While Kohlberg's framework provides useful insight into moral development, its application to social performance practice requires nuanced understanding. Rather than viewing the levels as strictly hierarchical, practitioners often need to integrate multiple levels of moral reasoning, considering immediate consequences, established norms, and universal principles while adapting to specific cultural and operational contexts. A more nuanced adaptation of the Kohlberg framework to moral reasoning in social performance practice could look something like this:

- **Level 1: Focus on immediate consequences**, such as avoiding conflict, meeting minimum requirements, and managing immediate risks. This level is more reactive and concerned with short-term outcomes.
- **Level 2: Understanding and applying norms**, such as viewing company policies as ethical frameworks, using industry standards as guidance, and considering cultural norms as valid factors in decision-making. This level is more proactive and involves understanding and adhering to established norms and standards.
- **Level 3: Integrative ethical reasoning**, which involves balancing multiple ethical frameworks, creating context-appropriate solutions, and understanding long-term implications of decisions. This level is more strategic and forward-thinking, taking into account a broader range of ethical considerations and potential long-term impacts.

Post-conventional behaviours are enabled when practitioners work in organisations that foster an environment that encourages open discussions about moral dilemmas in an environment of psychological safety. These are companies that go beyond a code of conduct that outlines expected behaviours and ethical principles. They might conduct regular training sessions on ethical decision-making and moral reasoning, using real-life scenarios and case studies to facilitate discussions and critical thinking. They create safe spaces for discussion through forums or discussion groups where employees can share ethical concerns without fear of retaliation. They encourage open dialogue about moral dilemmas in team meetings or dedicated sessions. Such companies encourage whistleblowing, and promote a culture where reporting unethical practices is seen as a responsibility. Leadership commitment is evident in the way leadership models ethical behaviour and demonstrates a commitment to ethical practices by actively participating in ethical discussions and being approachable for concerns.

Companies that demonstrate they value ethical reasoning also provide frameworks or tools to help employees evaluate ethical dilemmas systematically. A well-defined professional Code of Ethics for social performance practitioners can serve as a guide (rather than a prescription), supporting complex ethical reasoning, provide flexibility for context, and acknowledging multiple valid approaches.

5. The basic principles for a Code of Ethics

In this section, I propose a Code of Ethics for social performance professionals, for the purpose of prompting deliberation and constructive debate amongst practitioners and their stakeholders. The code is intended to guide decision making, and help professionals navigate complex situations while maintaining integrity. The code also establishes mechanisms for accountability, ensuring that practitioners are responsible for their actions and decisions. This accountability fosters transparency and encourages practitioners to reflect on their practices and their impacts on communities. This also has ripple effects beyond social performance practitioners to others in the organization by contributing to the development of an organisational culture that values ethical behaviour and responsible business. This culture encourages all employees to consider the social implications of their actions, reinforcing the importance of ethical conduct across the organisation.

A code also fosters a culture of open dialogue, encouraging practitioners to discuss ethical dilemmas with peers and seek support in challenging situations. This collaborative approach can alleviate feelings of isolation in instances when a practitioner feels they are the dissenting voice on the team and empowers practitioners when faced with pressures to conform.

In drafting the contents for a code, I followed three steps which will be elaborated below. In short, the first step considered existing competency development frameworks for social performance practitioners. The second step distilled from these competencies a set of principles to guide practitioner behaviours. The third step examined alignment between the draft ethical principles and long-established ethical theories.

As a starting point, two competency frameworks were drawn on: the Social Practitioner Competency Framework of the [Social Practice Forum \(2020\)](#) and SPGrow360, an assessment instrument developed by [Esteves and Moreira \(2021\)](#) which adapted the Social Practice Forum's framework and the competency development assessment literature. In testing and refining SPGrow360, its developers found that many of the Social Practice Forum's 31 competencies measured the same psychological construct. There are only 13 competencies in SPGrow360, under the themes of Empathy, Coping with Complexity, and Accountability:

- **Empathy:** Communication, Stakeholder Orientation, Cultural Self-Awareness, Adapting Knowledge to Context
- **Coping with Complexity:** Adapting to Cultural Differences; Integrating Multiple Perspectives; Information-Sharing, Considering Constraints, Promoting Equity
- **Accountability:** Resilience, Accountable for Time, Accountable for Team, Accountable for Resources

From the competencies in SPGrow360, I distilled a set of ethical principles for social performance professionals. The resultant principles are listed below. In [Table 1](#), I offer a real-life example of practitioners putting each principle into practice.

The proposed principles for a Code of Ethics for social performance professionals are:

- Advocacy for Community Rights:** Practitioners should advocate for the rights of individuals and communities affected by projects, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes and that their rights are protected.
- Sustainability Focus:** Practitioners should advocate for sustainable practices that consider long-term impacts on communities and the environment, aligning with the vision of fair and respectful development.
- Equity and Fairness:** Practitioners should advocate for equitable treatment of all stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups. This involves actively working to ensure that projects do not disproportionately benefit certain social groups at the expense of others.
- Empathy and Respect:** Practitioners should demonstrate empathy towards affected communities, ensuring that their concerns and aspirations are understood and respected. This involves active listening and valuing diverse perspectives.
- Cultural Sensitivity:** Practitioners should be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences, adapting their approaches to align with the values and norms of the communities they engage with. This includes recognising the impact of their actions on local cultures.
- Transparency and Honesty:** Social performance practitioners should maintain transparency in their communications with stakeholders. This includes being honest about the potential impacts of projects and disclosing how data is collected and used.
- Collaboration and Partnership:** Building trusting relationships with communities and other stakeholders is essential. Practitioners should seek to collaborate with community members and local organisations to foster mutual benefits and shared goals.
- Confidentiality:** Safeguard sensitive information obtained during stakeholder engagements, ensuring that personal data is handled ethically and securely.
- Integrity in Reporting:** Practitioners should ensure that all reporting and assessments are conducted with integrity, providing accurate and reliable information that reflects the true social impacts of projects.
- Accountability:** Practitioners should take responsibility for their actions and decisions, ensuring that they are held accountable to both their organisations and the communities impacted by their work. This includes acknowledging mistakes and learning from them.

Table 1
Examples of social performance practitioners demonstrating ethical principles in their work.

Ethical principles	Examples of practitioner application of each principle
Advocacy for Community Rights	During a project planning phase, Chike identifies potential human rights violations affecting local residents. By advocating for their rights, Chike ensures that the project is developed responsibly, with respect for people's dignity and without causing harm.
Sustainability Focus	Sofia is involved in a project that could lead to environmental degradation. Advocating for sustainable practices ensures the project is not developed at the expense of natural resources that people rely on for their wellbeing, aligning with broader goals of responsible business and ethical conduct.
Equity and Fairness	Leila advocates for groups that don't have formal land rights in a resettlement project but faces pushback from influential stakeholders who prioritise their interests. Upholding equity ensures that all voices are considered, preventing the marginalisation of vulnerable populations. Leila's advocacy can lead to more equitable outcomes and enhance the legitimacy of the project.
Empathy and Respect	Amina is working on a project that impacts a local community. She organises a consultation session but finds that many community members are hesitant to voice their concerns. By actively listening and showing genuine empathy, Amina can encourage open dialogue, ensuring community voices are heard. This fosters trust and builds stronger relationships, ultimately leading to better outcomes for both the project and the community.
Cultural Sensitivity	Fatima is tasked with engaging Indigenous communities for a project. She realises that her company's approach may not resonate with their cultural values. By adapting her strategies to respect cultural norms, Fatima can facilitate better engagement and cooperation to avoid harm and create mutual benefits.
Transparency and Honesty	Lars needs to report on the social impacts of a project but faces pressure from management to downplay negative effects. Maintaining transparency allows Lars to build credibility with the community and stakeholders. His honest reporting has helped prevent backlash and foster a culture of trust.
Collaboration and Partnership	Priya is managing an impact-benefit agreement-making process with a community and recognises the need to integrate multiple perspectives. By fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders within the community, Priya can create a more inclusive decision-making process, leading to solutions that benefit all parties involved and reducing conflicts.
Confidentiality	During community consultations, Ravi collects sensitive information about local residents' livelihoods. Safeguarding this information builds trust within the community. Practitioners who respect confidentiality are more likely to receive honest information.
Integrity in Reporting	After conducting social impact monitoring, Mei finds that the project has caused unforeseen negative effects. Reporting these findings with integrity allows for timely interventions and adjustments, demonstrating a commitment to community wellbeing.
Accountability	Isabella oversees a livelihood program and discovers that funds were mismanaged. By taking responsibility and addressing the mismanagement openly, Isabella can implement corrective measures, reinforcing accountability and demonstrating integrity to the community and her organisation.
Commitment to Continuous Learning	Kofi encounters new social performance challenges due to changing regulations and community expectations. By engaging in ongoing professional development, Kofi stays informed about best practices and emerging issues, enhancing his effectiveness and adaptability in the field.

Source: Author

- xi) **Commitment to Continuous Learning:** Social performance practitioners should engage in ongoing professional development to stay informed about best practices, emerging issues, and evolving ethical principles in the field.

6. A Code of Ethics promotes reasoned dialogue

The ethical principles for social performance practitioners presented above align in a general sense with Kantian normative ethics (Kant, 1785; Copp, 2007), which emphasises duty, moral principles, and the inherent value of individuals. For example, the principle requiring a commitment to *sustainability* reflects a broader Kantian duty to future generations, emphasising the responsibility to act in ways that respect the rights and wellbeing of all individuals over time. *Advocating for the rights of communities* aligns with Kant's emphasis on justice and the moral imperative to protect the rights of individuals, ensuring their voices are heard. Kantian ethics also emphasises *justice and fairness*, advocating for equal treatment of all individuals. This principle promotes the idea that all stakeholders deserve equitable consideration and treatment.

Kantian ethics stresses treating individuals as ends in themselves, not merely as means to an end. Practitioners demonstrating *empathy and respect* align with this principle by valuing the dignity and perspectives of affected communities. Recognising and *respecting cultural differences* reflects the Kantian imperative to acknowledge the autonomy and rationality of all individuals, supporting their right to make choices based on their cultural contexts. *Collaborations and partnerships* to achieve this based on relationships built on mutual respect aligns with Kant's view of moral community, where individuals engage with one another as rational agents, fostering cooperation and shared goals.

Kantian ethics also consider that *honesty* is a moral duty. Practitioners' commitment to *transparency* aligns with the categorical imperative, which demands that one acts according to maxims that can be universally applied. *Integrity in reporting* aligns with the duty to provide honest and reliable information, respecting the autonomy of

stakeholders. The principle of *accountability* resonates with Kant's notion of moral responsibility. Practitioners who acknowledge their actions and their consequences demonstrate adherence to moral law and the duty to rectify wrongs. A *commitment to continuous learning* reflects the Kantian ideal of self-improvement and the pursuit of knowledge as a moral obligation, enabling practitioners to make informed ethical decisions.

Deontological ethical frameworks (such as Kantian approaches), especially that are based on the intention of an act, are often juxtaposed against utilitarian ethical frameworks (e.g. Jeremy Bentham; John Stuart Mill) which are primarily based on outcomes. This dichotomy surfaces in many of the ethical dilemmas faced by practitioners. For instance, being asked to communicate others' beliefs that 'the country needs these minerals for the development of its people' is rather unhelpful to the practitioner working with families about to be resettled to an unwelcome host community to make way for the mining project. However, the juxtaposition is not black and white: while tensions do undoubtedly exist, there is also some alignment. For instance, ethical principles like *collaboration and partnership* and *sustainability focus* align with Utilitarianism by prioritising collective benefits and long-term positive impacts on communities. These principles are not only held by social practitioners but are shared with many that work on projects.

Contrasting the two frameworks can nonetheless be useful in pointing out the tensions in decision-making by social performance practitioners. The first point of tension between the two frameworks relates to individual rights versus collective good. Utilitarianism justifies sacrificing individual rights for the greater good, leading to potential conflicts with deontological principles that prioritise individual rights and moral duties. For example, if a project benefits many but harms a few, a utilitarian approach might accept the harm, while a deontological perspective would oppose it. Brereton et al. (2024) specifically challenge utilitarian arguments that suggest it may be acceptable to expose some communities to harm for broader societal benefits. They argue that it is not morally acceptable to harm one group of people just so another group can derive benefits.

The second point of tension relates to accountability. Utilitarianism focuses on the overall effectiveness of actions rather than individual accountability. In contrast, deontological ethics emphasises that individuals must be held accountable for their actions, regardless of the outcomes. This difference can create tension in decision-making processes.

The third point of tension relates to equity and fairness. Utilitarian approaches prioritise efficiency and overall benefit, potentially leading to unequal treatment of stakeholders. Deontological ethics insists on fairness and equitable treatment, which can conflict with utilitarian calculations that favour the majority.

The fourth point of tension relates to moral flexibility. Utilitarianism allows for moral flexibility, where rules can be bent if the outcome is deemed beneficial. Deontological ethics, however, holds that moral rules should not be violated, regardless of the consequences. This creates a fundamental conflict in how ethical dilemmas are approached.

Social performance practitioners must navigate these tensions, balancing the need for positive outcomes for society with the obligation to uphold ethical principles and respect for individual rights. This complexity is particularly evident in the context of company-community conflict. Conflictual relations are considered quite normal amongst social performance practitioners and opportunities for the expression of conflict are even welcomed. However, the dominant discourse in companies is to frame conflict from a utilitarian perspective, as a competition between interests. This leads to misinterpretations of community demands and grievances, based on the assumption that people are motivated by power over scarce resources.

Such misunderstandings and fallacies pervade social performance practice, getting in the way of healthy company-community relations and escalating social conflict. This is evident where, for example, practitioners sanction project teams to talk about the community as a threat to the project; develop engagement strategies solely based on an analysis of stakeholder influence and interests; reinforce inequity and exploit power relations by giving priority to engaging stakeholders with influence; promote the project as necessary to save society or the community; dismiss people's concerns as irrational or anti-development; or describe the purpose of engagement as 'sensitising', 'educating' or 'empowering' communities (Cicneros, 2024; Moreira et al 2021).

Cicneros (2024) encourages social performance practitioners to apply a decolonialist lens to their work, to question and challenge the dominant narratives and power structures that often shape project development. Seeing conflict as being a result of the imposition of a single worldview and preference for one set of values over others emphasises that practitioners have a moral responsibility to include marginalised voices and perspectives in decision-making processes. Understanding decoloniality fosters cultural sensitivity among practitioners. It encourages them to respect and integrate local knowledge and values into their practice. A Code of Ethics can guide practitioners to recognise and critically assess their assumptions and biases.

Joshua Greene (2014), in his book, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*, points out that there are more similarities between Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics than is conventionally thought. He claims that Utilitarianism has been largely misunderstood and emphasises the need for a balance between individual rights and collective wellbeing. While empathy is essential for moral decision-making, Greene cautions against allowing empathy to dictate decisions, especially in complex situations where the welfare of many is at stake. He emphasises the need for rational deliberation alongside emotional responses. Greene suggests that understanding and empathy can help bridge the gaps between different 'moral tribes', or 'us vs them' framing. Dialogue and collaboration to find common ground and address shared challenges are encouraged. Moral progress is possible through the application of reasoning and critical thinking. By recognising the limitations of our moral intuitions, we can work towards more inclusive and effective decision frameworks.

A Code of Ethics would serve as a valuable reference for practitioners

to have such reasoned dialogue and collaboration - amongst themselves, and with their stakeholders. The examples of applications of the proposed ethical principles in Table 1 would serve this purpose. To a practitioner, they may seem idealised and almost naïve representations of what happens in practice. Practitioners face many pressures that get in their way of making decisions that would conform with a Code of Ethics. In the next section I highlight these pressures, and indicate the support that would be needed from their organisational leaders and peers for a code to be effective.

7. A Code of Ethics can only go so far

A code demanding individual accountability for balancing the diverse expectations of various stakeholders holding a diversity of moral frameworks, which is an essential task of a social performance practitioner, is not easy to implement. Also, the business context in which such a code would be implemented is not always enabling. Integrating social performance into core business strategies rather than treating it as a peripheral activity remains a challenge. Companies often struggle to align social performance goals with financial objectives. Many, particularly small and mid-size companies, face limitations in terms of human resources dedicated to social performance. Many companies still prioritise short-term financial performance over long-term sustainability goals. This focus can undermine the effectiveness of social performance initiatives that require time to yield results. Economic fluctuations, such as recessions or crises (e.g., conflict, pandemics), divert attention and resources away from social performance initiatives, as companies prioritise survival.

Faced with such obstacles, and in the absence of a code, pragmatic social performance practitioners tend to follow the direction that help their cause, even though their own moral compass might point in a different direction. For example, as demands for transparency grow, companies must ensure they provide accurate and honest disclosures about their practices. Companies that fail to do so can lead to reputational damage and loss of stakeholder trust. Greenwashing poses another risk: stakeholders are increasingly vigilant, and accusations of greenwashing can severely damage corporate reputations. Practitioners that may be driven by motives other than protecting corporate reputations may use reputational risk arguments if they perceive this as the easiest way to persuade their audience.

Practitioners often experience cognitive dissonance, a psychology concept for when there is a contradiction between an individual's behaviour and beliefs. These issues often surface in coaching staff in corporate social performance roles. Coaching interventions that apply a systems psychodynamics lens bring to light numerous elements - in addition to diverse moral frameworks - influencing the individual's ability to deploy their social performance competencies. With this lens, the combination of social systems within their changing environments (Lewin, 1947); behaviour of individuals in groups (Bion, 1961); and psychodynamic thinking (Klein, 1976) is considered. The systems psychodynamics lens is also commonly referred to as the Person-Role-Organisation framework (P-R-O). For example, at a personal level (P), their challenges at work could be influenced by their needs, strengths, weaknesses, motivation, dreams and aspirations, defensive styles, attitudes to authority, or echoes of their early history. It could also have to do with their role at work (R): the boundaries of the role, how clear it is, its complexity, how the organisation perceives and values the role, and how the organisation uses the role. Their challenges also have to do with the wider organisation they fit in (O): its culture, team dynamics, and structure.

To illustrate the types of dilemmas faced by practitioners when attempting to deploy their social performance competencies, I offer 13 vignettes (see Table 2). The vignettes build on the examples presented earlier in Table 1 illustrating the application of ethical principles. Each dilemma below represents one of the 13 core competencies in SPGrow360 and shows how the competency is hindered by P-R-O

Table 2

Vignettes that provide examples of dilemmas that social performance practitioners face at work that inhibit deployment of their social performance competencies and create ethical conflicts.

Empathy	Coping with Complexity	Accountability
<p>Communication: Amina is tasked with presenting community feedback to upper management. Despite her strong communication skills, she struggles to convey the community’s concerns effectively. The organisational culture prioritises financial outcomes, leading her to feel undervalued. This lack of support from leadership dampens her motivation, making her hesitant to advocate strongly for the community’s perspective.</p> <p>Stakeholder Orientation: Hiroshi faces a dilemma when trying to engage with a local community resistant to the project. He knows that to build trust he needs to respond to their concerns about impacts on water. His efforts to disclose water quality data are met with scepticism from management, who fear it may reflect poorly on the company. This pressure prevents him from fully deploying his competency in stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>Cultural Self-Awareness: Fatima, working in a culturally diverse team environment, recognises the need for cultural self-awareness when interacting with Indigenous communities. However, she feels unsupported by her manager, who resists training programs on cultural sensitivity. This absence of resources leads to her feeling unprepared and anxious, hindering her ability to connect authentically with community members. Her lack of confidence ultimately affects her effectiveness in promoting understanding and respect.</p> <p>Adapting Knowledge to Context: Miguel is responsible for implementing social management plans to international standards in a complex regulatory and socio-political environment. While he possesses the knowledge to adapt initiatives, he struggles with organisational inertia. The company’s rigid policies and procedures clash with the dynamic needs of the community. This disconnect leaves him frustrated and powerless, as he cannot effectively deploy his competency to adapt knowledge to the situation at hand.</p>	<p>Attending to Cultural Differences: Sofia encounters challenges when trying to address cultural differences in a project impacting multiple communities. Despite her awareness, her colleagues dismiss the importance of cultural nuances, prioritising expediency. The lack of exchange of diverse perspectives within the team creates an environment that stifles her ability to deploy this competency effectively, leading to ineffective engagement.</p> <p>Integrating Multiple Perspectives: As a manager of an agreement-making process, Priya realises the necessity of integrating multiple perspectives. However, she faces resistance from some team members entrenched in their viewpoints. The team dynamics - where a few dominant voices overshadow others - makes it difficult for her to harness diverse insights.</p> <p>Sharing Information: Lars is responsible for sharing information about a project’s social impacts with the affected community. While he understands the importance of transparency, he encounters pushback from management, who fear reputational damage. Strong members in team that align closely with management serve to amplify fears and doubts. This creates a conflict for Lars, as he struggles to balance his accountability to the community with the expectations of his superiors and support from his team, ultimately limiting his effectiveness.</p> <p>Considering Constraints: Chike is tasked with managing community expectations regarding job opportunities related to the project. He knows that communicating realistic estimates is crucial, yet he feels compelled to promise more than what is feasible due to pressure from management. The tendency of the project team to focus solely on positive impacts creates a disconnect between personal integrity and organisational demands, preventing him from deploying his competency in considering constraints.</p> <p>Promoting Equity: Leila is motivated to promote equity across various stakeholder groups. However, she finds that existing power dynamics within her organisation favour politically influential stakeholders, making it difficult to advocate for marginalised communities. The accepted way of working - where certain voices dominate - creates a struggle for Leila, as she attempts to apply her competency while navigating a culture that overlooks the needs of less powerful groups.</p>	<p>Resilience: Kofi, facing constant challenges in his role, finds it difficult to maintain resilience. The organisational culture, which dismisses emotional wellbeing, leaves him feeling isolated and unsupported. This lack of recognition for the emotional toll of his work hinders his ability to bounce back from difficulties, ultimately affecting his performance and capacity to engage effectively with stakeholders.</p> <p>Accountable for Time: Isabella oversees a livelihood program requiring careful monitoring. However, the organisation’s focus on short-term results undermines her ability to implement a thorough approach. The constant sense of urgency within the team discourages long-term planning, leading to a lack of accountability in decision-making. The pressure to deliver quick outcomes leads to corners being cut, leaving her feeling conflicted about her accountability to both the community and her organisation.</p> <p>Accountable for Team: Mei faces challenges when her newly formed team sourced from different parts of the organisation is divided over how to approach community engagement. Despite her efforts to assign tasks based on strengths, she struggles with a lack of cohesion due to differing priorities. The organisational culture, which rewards individual performance over teamwork, exacerbates the situation, making it difficult for her to foster collaboration and accountability within the team.</p> <p>Accountable for Resources: Ravi manages the budget for social investment programs but faces challenges due to a lack of financial transparency in the organisation. As he tries to advocate for funding, he encounters resistance from the finance department prioritising cost-cutting. Ravi gives up, assuming that financial concerns overshadow social needs.</p>

Source: Author

aspects. These vignettes point to the systemic barriers faced by practitioners to align with a Code of Ethics.

In light of the challenges faced by social performance practitioners, it is essential to cultivate a supportive environment that encourages ethical decision-making and accountability. Organisations should prioritise the integration of social performance into core business, ensuring that practitioners have clear mandates and the necessary resources and backing from leadership. This commitment can be reinforced through ongoing training programs for other functions that focus on ethical principles, cultural sensitivity, and stakeholder dialogue, equipping staff with the skills to navigate complex situations effectively.

Fostering a culture of open dialogue within organisations is just as crucial. Encouraging practitioners to share their experiences and ethical dilemmas can create a collaborative atmosphere of psychological safety and where solutions are co-developed. Establishing clear channels for reporting unethical behaviour without fear of retribution will also enhance accountability and transparency. By addressing these structural and cultural barriers, organisations can empower social performance practitioners to uphold ethical principles, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the communities they affect.

8. Conclusion: building a profession valued for its accountability, integrity and culture of ethics

By adhering to ethical principles, social performance practitioners can enhance responsible practices within the companies they work with and increase their effectiveness in contributing to the wellbeing of communities.

A Code of Ethics would undoubtedly face some resistance, even amongst social performance practitioners. It could be seen as imposing rigid frameworks that limit their flexibility in responding to unique and complex situations, which could hinder their ability to adapt to the specific cultural and contextual needs of communities. Some may view it as an infringement on their autonomy and judgment, arguing that experienced practitioners can navigate ethical dilemmas without prescriptive guidelines. An ethical code may be seen as leading to a checkbox mentality, where practitioners focus on compliance rather than genuinely engaging with ethical principles. This could undermine the intent of fostering ethical behavior.

Practitioners may also worry that an ethical code could lead to punitive measures for perceived violations, creating a culture of fear rather than one of open dialogue and learning. This fear could discourage

honest discussions about ethical dilemmas. Others might argue that ethical codes do not necessarily change behavior. Individuals may still act unethically despite the presence of a code, suggesting that the cultural and organizational factors discussed earlier in this paper play a more significant role in influencing conduct. There is even a risk that an ethical code could be misused by organizations to deflect responsibility or accountability. Companies might leverage the code to present a façade of ethical behavior while failing to address underlying issues.

These challenges to implementing a Code of Ethics highlight the need for a careful approach to developing guidelines for practitioners to apply the ethical principles in their work. Learning from other professions that have successfully implemented codes of ethical practice, ethical principles should be complemented by guidance around conflicts of interest, conflicts in client/stakeholder interests, and professional independence. Conformance should be supported by three essential pillars: ongoing training on ethical principles and competencies, clear channels for reporting unethical behaviour, and regular reviews of the code to reflect changes in the profession and societal expectations.

The ethical principles in this paper have been proposed in the service of prompting deliberation and constructive debate amongst practitioners and their stakeholders. This dialogue will be vital in shaping a code that truly reflects the values and complexities of social performance practice. By collaborating and sharing perspectives, we can create a framework that not only enhances accountability and integrity but also fosters a culture of ethical engagement within the emerging profession.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ana Maria Esteves: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

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