

ethics and professional conduct

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ENGINEERS:

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE

ACTORS

BOTH YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The current Code of Ethics of Engineers states that “in all aspects of his work, the engineer must respect his obligations towards man and take into account the consequences of the performance of his work on the environment and on the life, health and property of every person.”

But did you know that this requirement was recognized and even demanded by Quebec engineers back in March 1923? In fact, the text of the first version of a code of ethics that was passed in 1924 and entitled *Code of Ethics and Method of Interpreting and Administrating the Code*² laid the foundations for notions such as duties to humanity.

Naturally, ethics is something that evolves and is always a reflection of its time. But it is interesting that Quebec engineers have always felt a sense of duty to protect the collective interest when it comes to the environment, life, health and property.

LEGACIES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The activities performed by engineers when practicing their profession often affect more than just their clients' interests. The impacts of their work can even transcend the boundaries of geography and time. While members of the

profession have always been attentive to the necessity of designing works, structures and systems that meet contemporary needs, they have also continuously acted as bearers of a kinder vision for future generations. They have been careful to perpetually use new and better processes in all fields of engineering.

At a time when the Earth has become one big global village and what we do affects the living conditions of others; in this period of climate change, pollution on a major scale and the depletion of natural resources, it is abundantly clear that works, structures and systems need to be sustainable from a global, multifactorial and environmental perspective. Quebec engineers have definitely grasped this.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

Engineers have long understood that they had a major role to play in what we now call sustainable development, i.e. “development



that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.³

By passing the *Sustainable Development Act*, Quebec has sanctioned this definition of sustainable development and put the focus on the way we do things by calling attention to a key sustainability factor: our ability to assess our actions on a global scale across disciplines.



“In Quebec, sustainable development means development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is based on a long-term vision that takes into consideration the inseparable character of the environmental, social and economic aspects of development activities.⁵”

Although the concept of sustainable development⁴ is not explicitly mentioned in the Code of Ethics of Engineers, the fact that it is been adopted in principle by Quebec lawmakers means that it is worth consideration and may in some circumstances influence analyses of specific contexts involving an engineer’s work and professional conduct.

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ENGINEERS

Take the current context, for instance. Since engineers must fulfill their obligations to humanity and take into account the consequences of their work on the environment and life, health and property, the Office of the Syndic could receive an inquiry request alleging that an engineer has not fulfilled his or her obligations toward community sustainability.⁶

These are the main steps in the inquiry process of the Office of the Syndic:

- ▶ verify the extent to which engineers are responsible for the work concerned and whether they actually have real control over it;
- ▶ determine the applicable framework for the work concerned (laws, regulations, standards and generally accepted engineering practices);
- ▶ evaluate the appropriateness of engineers’ conduct in their duties, given this framework and the specific context in which the work was carried out.

Looking to the future, the imminent overhaul of the *Code of Ethics of Engineers* offers yet another example of engineers’ relentless commitment to caring about the collective interest over the long term. Quebec engineers are ready and willing to continue being socially responsible actors.

We expect nothing less from our professionals! ■

1. *Code of Ethics of Engineers* (CQLR c. I-9, r. 6), section 2.01.
2. For more on this topic, see the article entitled “The Code of Ethics of Engineers, from Then to Now,” *Plan*, January-February 2020, p. 60-61.
3. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development entitled “Our Common Future” (also known as the Brundtland Report, named after the Chair of the Commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland).
4. Sustainable Development Act, CQLR D-8.11.
5. <http://menv.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/definition.htm>
6. See the articles “Socially Responsible Engineers” (parts one and two), *Plan*, September-October and November-December 2019 issues.