Delta Framework

# Principles to define and communicate sustainability performance in the agricultural commodity sector

better cotton™

ICAC INTERNATIONAL COTTON ADVISORY COMMITTEE

INTERNATIONAL COFFEE ORGANIZATION

GLOBAL COFFEE PLATFORM for a sustainable coffee world

Published 2022 by Better Cotton/ Delta Project Team[1]

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www.deltaframework.org

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**The project was possible thanks to a grant from the ISEAL Innovations Fund, which is supported by:**

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Federal Department of Economic Affairs,
Education and Research EAER
**State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO**

1 The four Delta Project partners are: Better Cotton, the Global Coffee Platform (GCP), the International Coffee Organisation (ICO) and the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC).

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# 1. Framing

The Delta Framework provides a set of 15 impact and outcome indicators to measure sustainability improvements within and across the cotton and the coffee sectors. In order to promote a globally harmonised approach for reporting sustainability results, the Delta Framework has a strong alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Delta Framework comprises a set of guiding documents to integrate the indicators into existing monitoring systems, to collect and analyse data, and to properly communicate sustainability improvements.

These guidelines are available on the Delta Project website and include:

1. **Delta Framework Sustainability Indicators.** This document presents the set of 15 indicators, the rationale for their selection, definitions, methodological notes, and main references for each indicator. It also includes the learnings from pilot testing the indicators in different countries and settings.
2. **Integrating new performance indicators into sustainability systems: practical considerations.** This document includes considerations and a set of guiding questions designed to support the inclusion of the indicators in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) systems of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and other organisations;
3. **Basic guidance for obtaining informed consent for the Delta Framework indicators data collection.** This document guides the incorporation of informed consent for the Delta Framework indicators data collection into existing organisational data strategy and policies;
4. **Description of a common data model for the Delta Framework indicators.** This document supports the implementation of common data models to facilitate future data aggregation and collective reporting;
5. **Principles to define and communicate sustainability performance in the agricultural commodity sector.** This document directs public and private sector stakeholders on deriving sustainability information and messages on the production of agricultural commodities from the data.
6. **Guidance and tool to aggregate producer-level sustainability data and report progress at national level.** This methodology aims to support national commodity associations and other relevant public bodies to aggregate producer-level data using the Delta indicators to assess the sustainability performance of the commodity's production at country level.

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## Delta Framework Sustainability Indicators

- Indicators description
- Definitions
- Methodologies
- References
- Learnings from pilot testing the indicators

## Integrating new performance indicators into sustainability systems: practical considerations

- Strategic framing for indicator integration process
- Data value chain
- Generation: data capture, acquisition, and obtaining informed consent
- Data transmission and validation
- Analytics: data processing and analysis
- Exchange: packaging and communicating insights, publishing, and sharing data

## Basic guidance for obtaining Informed consent for Delta Framework indicator data collection

- Data protection and the categorisation of personal and sensitive data
- Recommendations for how to obtain informed consent

## Description of a common data model for the Delta Framework indicators

- Overview of the information and data ecosystem
- Applying a common data model
- Mandatory data
- Application of existing data standards
- Ethical and data protection considerations
- Recommendations for how to apply the common reference data tables

## Principles to define and communicate sustainability performance in the agricultural commodity sector

- Monitoring versus impact indicators
- Framework application principles
- Indicators-specific principles
- Data collection principles

## Guidance and tool to aggregate producer-level sustainability data and report progress at national level

- Aggregate producer-level data
- Report sustainability progress at national level

# 2. Introduction

The present document outlines principles to guide the development and use of sustainability messages (including commercial claims and non-commercial forms of communicating sustainability outcomes related to an agricultural commodity) deriving from information gathered through the common set of indicators developed by the Delta Framework.

For the purpose of this document, the definition of a sustainability message follows ISEAL's description of a sustainability claim with an expanded scope to cover both commercial and non-commercial information about sustainability:

> "A message used to set apart and promote a product, process, business or service with reference to one or more of the three pillars of sustainability: social, economic and/or environmental."[1]

The importance of having principles guiding the use of sustainability messages stems from several factors. For example, there is increasing awareness that sustainability is a complex, evolving concept and that referring to a product, process, business or service as "sustainable" is not a sufficient condition to evaluate its actual added value with respect to other alternatives. In addition, throughout the years, sustainability messages have evolved to include a substantial number of different notions, practices, and applications, each often associated with a different underlying understanding of sustainability, and with varying degrees of regulations and quality monitoring. An explicit, transparent, and well-defined set of principles is thus essential to ensure the credibility of sustainability messages derived from specific standards—or from sustainability impact indicators such as those proposed by the Delta Framework.

Due to the tight interplay of social, economic and environmental dynamics that characterise the sector, the agricultural commodities markets exemplify well the challenges that make it vital to ensure that sustainability messages used are clear, credible, and match actual positive impact. For example, when devising a message claiming that a certain commodity is produced with "environmentally sustainable" methods, it is important to communicate well what aspect of environmental sustainability is considered to substantiate the claim and what are the eventual synergies or trades-off with the other sustainability dimensions, if any.

As a growing body of scientific knowledge on environmental and social impacts of agricultural activities is becoming available, sustainability information needs to be increasingly more precise and accurate to be reliable. For example, while in the past a decrease in the quantity of pesticides used was considered a good approximation for pesticide risk reduction, today we know that not all pesticides are the same and that some can be highly hazardous to the environment and human health already at very low concentrations. Furthermore, the definition of highly hazardous pesticides, and therefore the actual list of products banned from production,

[1] ISEAL Alliance. 2015. Sustainability claims. Good practice guide. Sustainability standards systems' guide to developing and managing environmental, social and/or economic claims. Version 1.0.

depends on the identification criteria used[2]. Similarly, on the social front, a message stating that producers of a certain commodity are "treated fairly" is not enough to assess whether they are, for example, paid fair wages, granted right of association, and/or provided with proper health and safety training and equipment.

## 2.1 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of these principles is to guide the generation of accurate and relevant impact data to inform sustainability monitoring and communication in the agricultural commodity sector. Reliable impact assessments are a powerful means to understand, enable and promote progress towards more sustainable development.

These guiding principles were developed primarily to support the application of the Delta Framework for coffee and cotton, and they are complementary to the existing guidance provided by the United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment)[3] to enable a consumer informed choice and by the ISEAL guides on good practices to derive sustainability claims[4].

The objectives of the guiding principles are to:

- guide the use of the common set of indicators proposed by the Delta Framework, and the collection and interpretation of data generated;
- direct public and private sector stakeholders towards deriving sustainability information and messages on the production of agricultural commodities from such data.

## 2.2 Target audience

These guidelines are directed to all practitioners and initiatives that collect data on the environmental and social impacts of the agricultural sector, including:

- Governmental Departments tasked with national reporting towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commitments;
- Voluntarily Sustainability Standards (VSS) schemes;
- Commodity-specific boards, committees and platforms;
- Donor-funded, development interventions on sustainable agriculture;

[2] Pesticide industry, civil society and UN organizations have adopted different criteria for the identification of highly hazardous pesticides.

[3] Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information. Global guidance in making effective environmental, social and economic claims, to empower and enable consumer choice. 2017. UN Environment.

[4] Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide. Sustainability Standards System' Guide to Developing and Managing Environmental, Social and/or Economic Claims. 2015.ISEAL Alliance.

- Commodity producers' organisations;
- Community of practices that operates in the space of sustainability.

The guidelines can also be of interest to the users of sustainability information such as:

- Policy-makers using evidence to inform policies;
- Sustainability-oriented consumers;
- Researchers and scientists; and
- Civil society engaged in advocating sustainable development.

# 3. Guiding and fundamental principles

These guidelines distinguish between two sets of principles:

- **Guiding principles** to assist practitioners in the implementation of the Delta Framework and the use of the core set of indicators. These principles include:
    - **System approach:** break through silo thinking
    - **Continuous improvement:** promoting incremental changes
    - **Gradual implementation:** building capacity and synergies
    - **Gender:** more than an indicator
    - **Participation:** creating shared value with farming communities
- **Fundamental principles** drawn from the Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information3 and contextualised for the Delta Framework. These principles aim to advise on best practices to appropriately link sustainability messages and claims with information derived from the Delta Framework common set of indicators and provide some good examples for inspiration. These principles include:
    - **Reliability:** a measure of integrity
    - **Relevance:** measure ALL and ONLY matters
    - **Clarity:** speak in a common language
    - **Transparency:** openness builds thrust
    - **Cost-effectiveness:** measure ONLY what matters

# 4. Guiding principles

## 4.1 System approach: breaking through the silo thinking

**Description:** A system approach is a way to make sense of complex environments and uncover the dynamics that have the greatest potential for impact. Agriculture is a complex, local environment. When assessing the sustainability of agriculture, a systems approach is best positioned to capture the interconnectivities, and potential trade-offs, between the social, economic, and environmental sustainability pillars. As recognised at the latest G7 (May 2019), climate change, biodiversity loss, and ocean and land degradation are interconnected global challenges that threaten peace, security, development, health, and economic stability.

In order to be useful in fostering sustainable development, the set of common indicators needs to be seen and used as a whole. The interpretation of the impact data must consider the connections and trade-offs existing between the various sustainability variables (e.g., productivity, quality, price and profitability, poverty reduction, food security, and biodiversity management). Focusing only on a few, cherry-picked sustainability indicators, not only might undermine the credibility of any information or message resulting from the impact assessment but will also fail to achieve a lasting, overall positive change.

## 4.2 Continuous improvement, contextual indicators, and universal targets: promoting change

**Description:** The set of common indicators proposed by the Delta Framework does not focus on assessing the quality of specific initiatives and businesses in terms of how they rank with respect to other comparable ones. Rather, the indicators emphasise monitoring progress being made by initiatives and businesses across commodity sectors towards the common goal of increased sustainability.

Most of the environmental and economic indicators are highly contextual, e.g., water management, productivity, and prices, and therefore data gathered on these areas are often not comparable across geographies and production systems, and improvements need to be explained against science-based, local baselines. Sustainability messages deriving from data collected across these indicators should focus on continuous improvement and positive change.

Some other indicators, however, namely the use of highly hazardous pesticides, deforestation, and child and forced labour, address poor or illegal practices in agriculture and have a zero-tolerance policy in any sound sustainability framework.

## 4.3 Gradual implementation: building capacity and synergies

**Description:** Initiatives should aim to implement the framework gradually, considering the human and financial resources needed, as well as the learning curve for initiatives/businesses not already engaged in sustainability assessment to some extent. In this sense, it is expected that a certain initiative may, for example, emphasise one specific pillar of sustainability over the others. The focus should then be to gradually implement sustainability monitoring and assessment, coupling the collection of information on the pillar with which the initiative has a more long-standing engagement, with seed efforts to gather data across the others over time. A possible option to start engaging with sustainability measurement in areas that are traditionally outside an initiative's core business is to pair up with other actors in the sector—for example, producing the same commodity—that may focus on other pillars of sustainability and have more readily available ways to measure these.

## 4.4 Gender: more than an indicator

**Description:** Considerations for gender equality and women empowerment issues should go beyond the measurement of a single indicator and be considered throughout the application of the framework. Besides the ethical obligations guiding such considerations, there is increasing recognition that closing the gender gap and empowering women producers is key to boost overall productivity in the global agricultural sector. Continuous and accurate monitoring of where gender disparities exist in the commodity sectors is thus essential to understand where improvements can be made. The Delta Framework proposes a composite indicator on Women's Empowerment adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) developed by IFPRI which considers various empowerment dimensions within and outside the household. In addition, wherever possible and relevant, initiatives employing the set of common indicators proposed by the Delta Framework should collect gender-disaggregated data and complement those with qualitative information to better understand the existing issues in their supply chain and measure gender-related changes over time. As for most of the social indicators, combining the use of qualitative and quantitative monitoring approaches is likely to produce a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

## 4.5 Participation: creating shared value with farming communities

**Description:** Farmers have often very little control over the agricultural data collected by governments and agribusinesses and most of the time this information ends up beyond their reach. The primary purpose of monitoring sustainability outcomes is to make farming more efficient and sustainable, and that is possible only if results are shared back with the farming communities in ways that can influence the adoption of best agricultural practices. Impact analysis should also be shared with extension departments to upgrade their knowledge and with local research institutions. The Delta Framework has as a key objective upgrading farmer services to accelerate progress on sustainability.

# 5. Fundamental principles

## 5.1 Reliability: a measure of integrity

**Description:** Sustainability messages should be derived from data that is accurate, scientifically true and consistent. Sustainability messages should avoid vague or ambiguous terminology, be in line with the impact indicators that underlie them, and should use, wherever possible and relevant, internationally agreed terminology and related definitions.

More importantly, when specific terminology is used within a sustainability message, it is essential to make sure that the actual practices employed in the production process are consistent with and fully justify the use of that terminology.

The Delta Framework refers to universally accepted definitions; sustainability information and messages derived from the set of common indicators should be substantiated with data and should ensure that such definitions are preserved. The application of this principle will result in accurate and credible messages.

**DON'T:** make generic and colloquial claims that cotton or coffee are produced without toxic chemicals. The toxicity of a substance is its capacity to cause injury to a living system. All pesticides have a certain level of toxicity. The above claim would therefore be true only if no pesticides at all had been used.

**DO:** communicate accurately on which products have been banned for use in the production process. Many sustainability standards have a list of pesticides not authorised for use. The Delta Framework indicator 1 will provide a common list of hazardous pesticides not recommended for use in cotton and coffee cultivation.

An example of good communication: "Growing Coffee Without Endosulfan" joint FAO, PAN UK, 4C and ISEAL project.

## 5.2 Relevance: measure ALL and ONLY what matters

**Description:** The common indicators outlined by the Delta Framework address sustainability holistically, across its three pillars. However, the relevance of each single indicator to the socio-economic and farming context of one's specific product or initiative should be assessed, as there may be circumstances where one or more indicators do not apply. An a priori assessment should be performed, and baseline information collected and presented to highlight which indicators, among the proposed set, are relevant to measure in the specific farming context of the country and which improvements are pursued.

Sustainability commitments or claims on issues that are not a priority might be interpreted as "burden-shifting" or "greenwashing" and could potentially project a negative image on the country, the brand or the initiative.

**DON'T:** make a generic claim that an agricultural commodity is completely sourced and produced without child labour as this does not guarantee that the company is actively contributing to addressing the primary causes of child labour in agriculture and therefore contributing to poverty alleviation and socio-economic sustainability.

**DO:** use clear communication on the size of the problem and what is being done to address it. An example of good communication: Fairtrade International and child labour.

## 5.3 Clarity: speak in a common language

**Description:** Sustainability messages should avoid vague or ambiguous statements and be in line with the impact indicators that underlie them. Communication should remain simple but reliable and accurate.

**DON'T:** make a generic claim that a crop has been produced with less water as this does not per se guarantee that the water-saving is attributable to the adoption of good practices and that it is the result of a long-lasting improvement in the overall water stewardship.

**DO:** communicate figures and facts on water saving and contextual information on water risk in the area. Example of good communication: The Australian Grown Cotton Sustainability Report provides a full account of water challenges, water use efficiency, and productivity in the national cotton sector.

## 5.4 Transparency: openness builds trust

**Description:** Transparency refers to the ability of target stakeholders of the sustainability message being used to easily access and understand the underlying information that substantiates the message. Information provided as a background, or together with the message, should be enough for target users to evaluate its accuracy and reliability. The language employed in sustainability messages should also be tailored—for example, in terms of complexity or level of detail—depending on the specific context and audience it is designed for. Although transparency and traceability have grown significantly in the commodity sector, a simple and quick Google search reveals that several unsubstantiated, green claims are still out there.

**DON'T:** make self-declared claims that a certain cotton or coffee is green, good or superior because it is produced according to sustainable farming practices, without providing access to a full description of the practices and the monitoring system in place.

## 5.5 Cost-effectiveness: measure ONLY what matters

**Description:** Considering the substantial human and financial resources required to ensure proper sustainability monitoring and assessment, cost-effectiveness is an important guiding principle, including sustaining such efforts over a sustained period of time. Often much of the data collected is not fully analysed or exploited or was already available from other sources. This results in an over-burdening of the M&E systems, and more importantly, of the primary source of information, i.e., farmers. Also, advances in technology have led to a rapid increase in digital data collection and innovative and automated ways to collect data. The use of geo-localized maps and Satellite Imagery Analysis facilitates the measurement of impacts in a wider area with less effort and enables communication of results in a more visual manner. For instance, geospatial analysis options can add value to field-level data, e.g., crop quality, crop yields, crop area estimation, water usage, and detection of (illegal) deforestation at a landscape level. Cost-effectiveness can be achieved in several ways at the stage of data collection. Key strategies to be considered are:

**DO:**

- collaborate with existing initiatives or businesses operating in the same area of work engaged in sustainability assessment and monitoring, e.g., complementary certifications;
- exchange with governmental agencies tasked with national agricultural census data and SDGs national reporting;
- use data from the multiple thematic and general data sources that are already available and accessible for several relevant indicators;
- consider periodic data collection to measure progress against an established benchmark, e.g., 3 or 5 years for impact level indicators.

Published 2022 by Better Cotton/ Delta Project Team

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