

Partnering for Increased Learning in Smallholder Supply Chains



The Sustainable Food Lab, COSA, and the ISEAL Alliance are collaborating to improve the learning and effectiveness made possible with measurement frameworks that monitor the sustainability of smallholder farming systems.

ISEAL, COSA, and the Sustainable Food Lab support efforts to ensure consistency and alignment of indicators to measure the short, medium, and long term outcomes of agriculture systems. This collaboration is one component of a broader effort for transparency, consensus building, and mutual learning among the three organizations and the networks they represent. We see this work responding to the needs supply chain actors have expressed: to communicate supplier conditions effectively, to be valued partners in addressing challenges, and to have assurance that trade has a positive social impact and supports progress toward sustainable farming.

A useful starting point is to have consistent and commonly shared sustainability indicators where possible. In fact, SFL and ISEAL's frameworks have already drawn on COSA's indicators as well as those of other initiatives. This collaboration now aims to:

1. Better understand the approach and scope of each organization's work on monitoring and evaluation.
2. Provide clarity and prevent confusion among the frameworks of COSA, ISEAL, and the Shared Approaches Framework developed by the performance measurement Community of Practice facilitated by the Sustainable Food Lab.
3. Identify areas of overlap and arrive at common approaches, especially for the indicators.

The three organizations bring distinctive capacities to the collaboration: COSA with its expertise in indicator development and rigorous assessment, ISEAL representing the power of sustainability standard systems as a key lever of market transformation, and the Sustainable Food Lab with its pre-competitive collaborative learning network.

This document is intended to characterize the work of each organization in regards to M&E while distinguishing the unique audiences and purpose for their measurement work.

[COSA](#) is an independent non-profit consortium whose mission is to advance systematic and science-based measurement tools for understanding, managing, and accelerating sustainability in agriculture. Among its many activities, COSA designs, trains, and implements baseline or initial assessments, performance monitoring, and impact evaluations.

COSA's Impact Assessments¹

are comprehensive studies characterized by a multi-dimensional look at sustainability (including environmental, economic, and social indicators) and by the use of advanced methods and multi-criteria analysis. They assess the important impacts on a target group receiving a sustainability intervention or program and also compare this to a control group that is otherwise similar, but are not part of the intervention or program. COSA's collaboration with a number of leading research institutions around the world helps to ensure credible results that are practical for the realities of local conditions in developing countries.

COSA's Performance Monitoring²

approach offers compatibility with the Impact Assessments to improve credibility overall, but uses a much simpler approach that is low-cost and easy to implement. Performance Monitoring is, first and foremost, a management tool that offers real-time reporting and rapid insights into sustainability. COSA Performance Monitoring easily integrates into daily business operations, making it simple for managers to capture Key Performance Indicators and facilitate smarter decision-making.

All of COSA's research, surveys, and digital tools balance standardization (to facilitate

comparisons and benchmarking) with the ability to make useful adjustments to fit the local context and a client's areas of interest. Although specific data and reports can remain private (e.g., for a corporation to better understand its supply chain), aggregated data and lessons are used globally for learning and as a common good.

Audiences

COSA works closely with scientists and research institutions to deliver reliable and customized solutions to meet the individual needs of at least four specific groups:

1. Producers
2. Policy makers, inter-governmental organizations, and development agencies
3. Traders, manufacturers, retailers, and investors
4. Standard bodies and NGOs

Use Cases

COSA assessments are conducted to evaluate hypotheses regarding the effects of an intervention on the sustainability of a farming system. COSA collaborates with clients and partners to inform and manage the sustainability challenges they face. The four most common objectives are to:

- Encourage farm level sustainability in practical ways;
- Link competitiveness and sustainability (efficiency, risk management, etc.);
- Integrate sustainability information into operations or supply chains;
- Develop credible sustainability communications.

Collaborators

COSA collaborations occur at three main levels:

1. With inter-governmental agencies and non-profit organizations (UNFSS, IDB, FAO, SFL, ISEAL, etc.) to foster common and practical ways to measure sustainability;
2. With an array of more than 40 partners and clients including development agencies, universities, and global corporations who seek to understand and manage sustainability in agriculture;
3. With strong research partner institutions based in developing countries, that conduct the training and assessments in their own regions to ensure contextual validity. These partnerships offer practical long-term availability for COSA partners and clients as follow-up work is required. This reduces costs and complexities of employing multiple outside consultants or agencies to replicate the work.

Parameters & Points of Distinction

- COSA conducts its research on farming systems in low and middle income countries.
- COSA surveys are designed to be relatively brief and practical compared to some types of in-depth academic studies. This means it is uncommon in COSA assessments (though not impossible) to collect physical soil and water samples.
- COSA seeks to observe sustainability with a balanced understanding of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions.
- COSA is not an auditor to check on specific compliance or completion of records and paperwork.
- COSA assesses many sustainability

interventions in agriculture including the effects of specific standards, projects, or formal certification schemes.

- COSA operates, where possible, with strong local research institutional partners in order to build the capacity to independently conduct high-quality further work in evaluation.

¹The terms "Impact Assessment" and "Impact Evaluation" are both used in this document to mean an ex-poste evaluation of a sustainability intervention.

²In this document, Performance Monitoring and Performance Measurement refer to the same practice: a shorter and lighter form of assessment of the outputs and outcomes of a sustainability intervention, without a counterfactual. Performance Monitoring/Measurement is typically conducted to fine tune a sustainability intervention or investment or ensure it is proceeding as planned.

[ISEAL](#) is the global association for sustainability standards. Its mission is to strengthen standards systems for the benefit of people and the environment, and it helps organizations to demonstrate and improve their impacts through credible and robust processes.

ISEAL's Work on Impacts

ISEAL members are committed to implementing the [ISEAL Impacts Code](#), one of ISEAL's three Codes of Good Practice. Along with the Impacts Code, ISEAL also brings together its members in a community of practice on M&E. Within this community of practice, and through support from the Ford Foundation, a group of ISEAL members in agriculture and forestry have undertaken a collaboration project. The aim of ISEAL's Demonstrating and Improving Poverty Impacts project is to provide a more complete picture of how standards systems contribute to sustainable rural livelihoods and pro-poor development practices and how to improve the impact of their systems. In the first phase of the project, the main outputs have been a [common Research Agenda](#) on poverty impacts, a [Conceptual Framework](#) to capture a shared vision of how they drive poverty reduction, and a set of ["common core" indicators](#) for use in performance monitoring and impact evaluations.

The goal of identifying common indicators is to drive greater consistency in ISEAL members' M&E indicators. The use of common indicators will make it easier to collate and compare information across systems and studies and thus increase and deepen collective learning about the contribution that sustainability systems make to improving livelihoods and addressing other aspects of sustainability. A

commitment to use common indicators also facilitates shared testing and improvement of indicators and M&E systems. To facilitate the consistent application of the common core indicators ISEAL is making public detailed indicator definitions and guidance, which we will update on a regular basis to capture the experience derived from testing and implementing these indicators.

Audiences

The primary intended audience for the ISEAL common core indicators is standard setting organizations, particularly the members of the ISEAL Alliance and the wider ISEAL community. The implementation of M&E indicators by sustainability standards has some special and shared challenges, particularly around meeting information needs of different stakeholders and around collecting data through audits. ISEAL's work on common core indicators is thus aimed at addressing the specific M&E needs and challenges facing sustainability standards and helping them apply and adopt these indicators. In their current iteration, these indicators are most suitable for agriculture and forestry standard setting organizations, but a number of indicators can be adapted to other sectors.

The indicators are also a useful reference for researchers and other actors with an interest in the performance of sustainability standards. They also provide guidance for organizations and initiatives seeking to gather data from sustainability standards. As adoption of the ISEAL common core indicators increases among sustainability standards, it will become easier for the standard systems to provide information to other data initiatives in a standard and aligned format.

Use Cases

The current set of common core indicators is designed to facilitate an understanding of the:

- Reach of standards systems (e.g., geographic areas, sectors, number of certificates, numbers of farmers, extent of multiple certification, and turnover rates).
- Characteristics of farmers, enterprises, groups and workers covered by the standard system.
- Sustainability outcomes along the six pathways in a shared conceptual framework: resource management, business resilience, production, group strengthening, labor rights and community development.
- Well-being at the household level.

Depending on the indicator, data collection can take place at the level of the certified entity (individual producer), certificate holder (e.g., single certified farm, forest enterprise, producer group), household or worker.

Collaborators

ISEAL works on identifying and defining relevant indicators through a collaborative process with ISEAL members, while also drawing on and contributing to the work of other well-recognized organizations such as COSA, Sustainable Food Lab, SSI, WWF, SAI Platform, IRIS, and FAST as well as emerging indicator initiatives in commodity or sustainability sectors. We also seek to collaborate with standard systems, research organizations, and others to test the indicators in the field and to consult with standard systems stakeholders in the choice of relevant indicators.

Parameters & Points of Distinction

The ISEAL common core indicators are:

- Conceived to generate greater consistency of ISEAL members' M&E indicators, enable collective reporting of the Alliance and promote a culture of shared learning and improvement.
- Designed to help agricultural and forestry standards systems understand their contribution to pro-poor development. As ISEAL, its members, and partners embark on other collaborative projects, the set of ISEAL common core indicators may expand into other thematic areas and other sectors.
- Specifically designed for sustainability standards systems. While the indicators themselves may largely overlap and be aligned with those used by other organizations, our guidance on the use of the indicators aims to address the specific needs and challenges of standard systems.
- Useful for both performance monitoring of standards systems and impact evaluations.
- Not prescriptive of the use of a particular methodology or data collection tool. Instead the intent of indicator definitions and detailed guidance is to help users collect data for the indicators using multiple data collection methods (e.g., registration forms, audit form, survey, focus groups, etc.).

³Forest Stewardship Council, Fairtrade International, 4C Association, Rainforest Alliance/Sustainable Agriculture Network, the Union for Ethical Bio Trade, and UTZ Certified.

SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB

With the acknowledgment that even the Nestlés and Unilevers of the world cannot move the needle on sustainability alone, the [Sustainable Food Lab](#) convenes a consortium of businesses, NGOs and academic institutions that share a commitment to mainstream sustainable agriculture. These organizations have come together over the past 10 years to create a peer-to-peer, pre-competitive network where members build strong and lasting relationships that enable them to be more effective at their work. They share information, co-develop strategies, prototype solutions, and manage projects in a “safe space” collaborative environment.

The Food Lab’s Performance Measurement Work:

As part of promoting the sustainable development impacts of global supply chains, the Sustainable Food Lab has facilitated a [multi-year community of practice on measurement in smallholder supply chains](#). Global companies are seeking more insight into who their farmers are and whether conditions are improving as a results of trade and investment projects. The community of practice brings together companies, development organizations, lenders, and certification organizations to share cases and lessons and to develop consensus among core common approaches. Specific activities of the community of practice include:

1. Workshops and peer to peer discussions on measurement that focus on sharing what works and what doesn’t when assessing the sustainability of smallholder supply chains;
2. Development of a framework called [A Shared Approach to Smallholder Performance Measurement](#). The framework is based on the convergence

around good practice when measuring a common core set of performance indicators; and,

3. Fieldwork to test indicators and metrics.

Audiences

The primary audiences for this smallholder performance measurement work are food and beverage companies working with smallholder farmers in developing and middle income countries. We also hope to engage and inform other supply chain stakeholders—like standards organizations, development agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions—who are doing similar work.

Use Cases

Current users and testers of the Shared Approaches framework are Syngenta, Unilever, Starbucks, Nestlé, Mars, Diageo, SAB Miller, Root Capital, Fairtrade USA, Catholic Relief Services and the Grameen Foundation among others. Testers are using the indicators to develop (often times with the help of the Sustainable Food Lab) surveys that are carried out at the household level in smallholder supply chains in developing countries.

Some organizations have adopted as much as 95% of the indicators as their measurement framework. Others are using just a few of the Shared Approaches indicators. The crops of focus are coffee, cocoa, tea, vanilla, sugar, barley, cassava, and others.

Collaborators

COSA, ISEAL, the Ford Foundation, Mars, IDH, Rainforest Alliance, CDI at Wageningen, Root Capital, and Unilever have all worked with the Food Lab to co-develop the Shared Approaches

Framework. Several other organizations, including the Grameen Foundation, Unilever, Ben & Jerry’s, Fairtrade USA, Fairtrade International, Utz, Syngenta, Keurig Green Mountain, Nestlé, Starbucks, GIZ, CIAT, IFC, SAB Miller, Diageo, Business Action for Africa, World Cocoa Foundation and others, have contributed to the learning community that is testing and revising the framework and sharing learning on what works when assessing the sustainability of smallholder chains.

Parameters & Points of Distinction

- The Sustainable Food Lab’s performance measurement work is designed to be detailed enough to provide actionable data while remaining affordable and scalable. The indicator framework and resulting metrics are simple enough that the surveys can be administered by minimally trained local people and do not require highly professional enumerators
- The Shared Approaches Framework is a performance measurement assessment and serves as a sustainability snapshot in time that can also be useful—when administered on a regular basis—for tracking change over time. The data it provides allows for correlation between variables but not causation. In this sense, it does not track impacts, but outputs and outcomes.
- The methodology associated with the Shared Approaches framework does not prescribe the use of control groups and does not suggest that users will be able to attribute findings to specific interventions or investments.
- The Shared Approaches Framework is a starting point for engaging value chain actors in rapid assessment of the sustainability of smallholder supply

chains for adaptive management, rather than a static document or tool. As Food Lab partners test the framework in the field they feed back their learning and reflections on the indicators. This feedback gets incorporated into future versions of the framework.

- Like the COSA assessment work, the Sustainable Food Lab’s work in this arena focuses primarily with farmers and on crops in developing countries.

For more information on measurement from COSA, ISEAL, or the Sustainable Food Lab:

COSA:
www.thecosa.org
Christina Ingersoll:
ci@thecosa.org

ISEAL:
www.isealalliance.org
Marta Maireles:
marta@isealalliance.org

Food Lab:
www.sustainablefood.org
Emily Shipman:
emily@sustainablefood.org