



THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITYSM

OPTIMIZING SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT

SETTING SUSTAINABILITY PRIORITIES

FoodIntegrity.org

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction** 3
- Optimizing Sustainability: A Simplified Sustainability Priority Process** 4
 - STEP 1** Establish a Sustainability Leadership Team 5
 - STEP 2** Identify business objectives and company values 6
 - STEP 3** Identify stakeholders 6
 - STEP 4** Identify relevant sustainability attributes 7
 - STEP 5** Collect data and information 8
 - STEP 6** Analyze stakeholder concerns and identify priority issues 10
 - STEP 7** Evaluate potential tradeoffs between the attributes
identified as priorities 11
 - STEP 8** Finalize priorities and rationale 16
- Appendix: Food System Sustainability Dimensions and Attributes** 17
- Resources** 19
 - Sustainability Organizations and Programs 19
 - Commodity/Trade Associations 19

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability was originally synonymous with being “green.” Improving and protecting the environment was the initial driver for both consumers and business. Today, consumers view sustainability more holistically, incorporating interconnected sets of issues tied to being a responsible consumer and responsible citizen. While sustainability still maintains a strong association with environmental attributes, today’s definition can also include health and wellness, animal welfare, treatment of workers, food waste, packaging, impact on local and indigenous communities, and a range of additional issues that impact people, animals and the planet.

A variety of interest groups and other organizations are harnessing the increased interest in the evolving definition of sustainability to capture opportunity or promote a specific agenda. In a recent review, CFI identified more than 250 separate attributes of sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

The decision making framework in this document is intended to give food system stakeholders a tool and process to evaluate the growing list of sustainability priorities to determine the impact of potential decisions. With this information companies can make better informed decisions that are aligned with their values, the values of their stakeholders and their business objectives. The process is designed to both help companies make decisions and to communicate those decisions in a manner that reflects the organization’s values and commitment to sustainability.

Optimizing Sustainability

A SIMPLIFIED SUSTAINABILITY PRIORITY PROCESS

If your organization does not have an established sustainability strategy, the following process can be helpful to identify priorities and create a platform for moving forward.

Your sustainability prioritization process can be as formal or informal as you want or are able to make it. Depending on available resources, the assessment can be done in-house or sustainability advisors or other consultants can assist you. Outside consultants may have specific or proprietary methods they use to conduct such an assessment. The following process can guide you through the key steps to define a sustainability strategy that is appropriate for your organization and its unique mission, values and stakeholders.

- ▶ **STEP ONE** ESTABLISH A SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP TEAM
- ▶ **STEP TWO** IDENTIFY BUSINESS OBJECTIVES & COMPANY VALUES
- ▶ **STEP THREE** IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS
- ▶ **STEP FOUR** IDENTIFY RELEVANT SUSTAINABILITY ATTRIBUTES
- ▶ **STEP FIVE** COLLECT DATA & INFORMATION
- ▶ **STEP SIX** ANALYZE STAKEHOLDER CONCERNS & IDENTIFY PRIORITY ISSUES
- ▶ **STEP SEVEN** EVALUATE POTENTIAL TRADEOFFS BETWEEN THE ATTRIBUTES IDENTIFIED AS PRIORITIES
- ▶ **STEP EIGHT** FINALIZE PRIORITIES & RATIONALE

Establish a Sustainability Leadership Team

Due to the complexity of sustainability, initiatives are often spread across a company, depending on which functional area is impacted or tasked with implementing sustainability policy. If your organization does not have a dedicated sustainability department or position, and many do not, it is important to designate someone to be responsible for leading a cross-functional team focused on sustainability. The person selected for this role ideally is a member of the senior leadership team who carries the full support of the organization's management.

GUIDANCE The authority to hold accountable those who do not report to them in the business organization is imperative for success. Performance goals and evaluations should recognize individuals' sustainability activities and acknowledge their contributions that may extend beyond their day-to-day job descriptions. Visible senior support for a sustainability task force is crucial for the work to receive the appropriate priority and resources needed for success.

In creating a Sustainability Leadership Team, as indicated by the complex dimensions of sustainability, this guidance group should reflect the diversity of functional areas potentially impacted by sustainability initiatives and potentially a range of stakeholders. Depending on your goals and comfort level, this may include only company management and employees, or may include external stakeholders as well. Maximum credibility and acceptance will come from being more rather than less transparent and inclusive. Regardless of who you ultimately involve, the final decisions on which areas of sustainability are a priority remain with the company.

Functional areas to consider for inclusion on a sustainability leadership team include:

- Environmental
- Operations
- Human Resources
- Accounting/Finance
- Sales/Marketing
- Communications
- Public Affairs
- Transportation/Distribution/Logistics
- Purchasing

STEP TWO

Identify business objectives and company values

Once your leadership team has been assembled and understands/agrees upon its objective and scope, the important process of identifying and selecting sustainability priorities begins. It can be easy to allow “the squeaky wheel to get the grease” by simply responding to whichever advocacy group is making the most noise or putting the most pressure on the company. But a single or issue-by-issue approach can have unanticipated consequences and result in a scattered, ineffective approach to improving sustainability. Instead, a thoughtful process that aligns sustainability priorities with company values and business strategy and recognizes that not all attributes of sustainability are equal and come with trade-offs will result in a commitment that a company or brand can effectively execute, and provides the best path to success for the company and sustainability.

To effectively consider tradeoffs requires a clear set of business objectives and company values as a starting point. These become the metrics against which you will evaluate tradeoffs and potential conflicts with stakeholders’ sustainability priorities which may be different than the company’s.

Business objectives are generally easy to identify but company values may not be as obvious. Some companies may not have consciously communicated their values as an organization, so taking the time to articulate these values – what is important to the organization, guiding principles of how the company will do business and how its people will conduct themselves – will add an important dimension to future sustainability commitments.

STEP THREE

Identify stakeholders

Interest in sustainability comes from many directions. Identifying which stakeholder groups are important to your business success as well as those that are most active related to sustainability assures a 360-degree view of the issue. As you progress in communicating your sustainability commitments, it is important to demonstrate that stakeholder perspectives have been considered, and to acknowledge their concerns even if their particular issue does not end up as a priority for your organization, or you choose not to take immediate action on their issue. Demonstrating that you have considered and evaluated a variety of stakeholder perspectives as part of your process builds trust with a wide range of stakeholders and creates a policy that is more easily articulated and defended.

Potential stakeholders:

▶ **INTERNAL**

- Employees
- Functional areas

▶ **EXTERNAL**

- Customers, including consumers, retailers, foodservice, distributors and others you supply
- Community stakeholders, such as local leaders in government, business, religious or charitable organizations as well as interested citizens
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as consumer, animal welfare, environmental and worker safety groups, among others
- Supply chain representatives, including groups such as farmers/growers, packaging suppliers, equipment manufacturers, distributors, and others
- Labor representatives
- Potential employees
- Investors

STEP FOUR

Identify relevant sustainability attributes

A review of sustainability dimensions shows that there are literally hundreds of potential attributes of sustainability for a company to consider. And of course, no company can address them all, nor are all equally important to an organization or its stakeholders. For the food industry, some, like food safety, obviously take precedence. But once you move beyond the obvious, how do you decide where to focus your resources?

Even if your company is just beginning its sustainability journey, it likely is already considering attributes of sustainability as part of other initiatives. A company's strategic planning, business continuity, continuous improvement, risk management, marketing activities or other initiatives may include components relevant to sustainability even if they aren't called out as such. To avoid reinventing the wheel, review the various current business processes or initiatives for links to sustainability. For example, supply chain initiatives to reduce resource consumption or operations projects to improve efficiency may tie closely to sustainability. Attributes of sustainability that

are being addressed as part of existing programs indicate that they have already been identified as important to the company. Is marketing exploring certain product attributes or label claims that tie into sustainability? Presumably, these have been identified as important to your consumers. The sustainability elements already targeted as part of your business process are strong contenders for your sustainability priorities short list.

Conversely, focusing only on topics related to profitability or risk avoidance may overlook sustainability attributes important to stakeholders or that benefit the company in other ways. Once you have identified sustainability attributes that are already in play, take a step back and look at the larger sustainability playing field to see what you may be missing.

A good first step is a simple brainstorming exercise. Begin by listing the dimensions of sustainability important to your company on a flip chart. The three generally recognized dimensions are Environment, Social and Economic. Ask participants which of the various attributes under each do they think are:

1. important to the company,
2. important to stakeholders,
3. consistent with company values, and
4. aligned with your business objectives.

This exercise will likely yield a still-substantial list of sustainability attributes. Review which attributes cross over or show up in more than one dimension. Discuss which attributes may negatively or positively impact other attributes. This exercise will help participants begin thinking about the concept of tradeoffs and priorities.

STEP FIVE

Collect data and information

A veritable gold mine of information to help understand what attributes of sustainability are important to both internal and external stakeholder groups likely already exists within your organization or outside resources. Mining these resources for data and insights relating to sustainability may provide a partial or perhaps even a complete picture for one or more stakeholder groups. The following chart lists potential internal and external sources for data that already exist, as well as other research methods appropriate to each audience should additional research be needed.

Once you've completed your inventory and extracted the information relevant for each stakeholder group, determine what additional input is needed to complete the picture. The marketing or consumer insights department is a good resource for expertise on how to best fill missing information gaps. Depending on the audience, this may include formal or informal research, utilizing one or more of the other methods described in the chart.

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	DATA SOURCES	OTHER METHODS
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employee engagement or satisfaction surveys ● Existing employee safety or other teams ● Labor representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Email surveys ● Focus groups
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consumer relations contacts ● Social media comments ● Brand market research ● Trade association surveys ● Market research firm reports ● Industry research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Online surveys ● Focus groups
Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Customer service contacts ● Customer surveys ● Customer information requests ● Trade association surveys ● Industry research ● Market research firm reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Email surveys ● One-on-one interviews
Non-governmental organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● NGO websites ● Trade association insight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● One-on-one interviews/meetings
Community leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chambers of commerce ● Local media coverage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● One-on-one interviews ● Group meetings
Suppliers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trade publications ● Commodity organization research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Email surveys ● Farmer meetings

STEP SIX

Analyze stakeholder concerns and identify priority issues

Once you have collected input from the various sources and stakeholder groups, analyze the results to identify the top concerns by stakeholder group. Now it's time to revisit Step 4, and with this information, refine and prioritize the list of sustainability attributes for your organization.

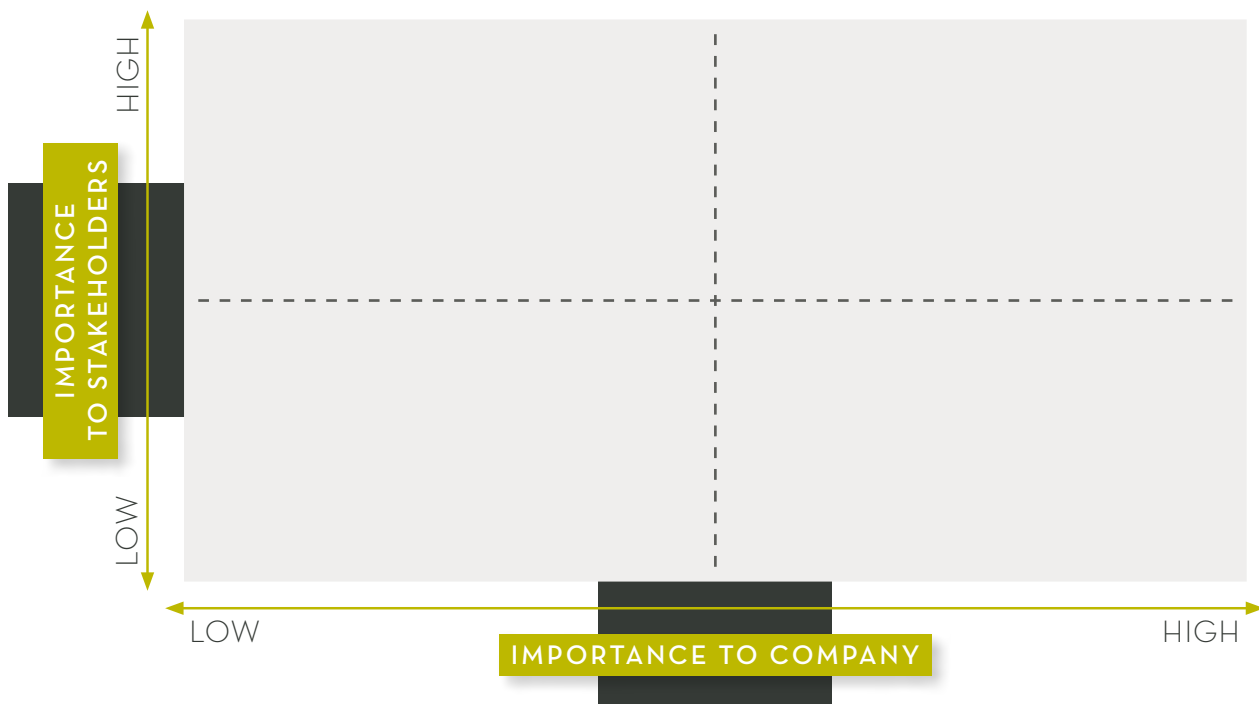
To narrow the list, use this exercise to begin prioritizing. Give participants round stickers in three different colors, five stickers of each color. The three colors of stickers represent:

1. Stakeholder perspective
2. Company performance or profitability perspective
3. Company/brand values, culture and reputation perspective

Instruct participants to place their stickers by the attributes they think are most important from each of the three perspectives. This forced-choice exercise will likely reveal disparities or conflicts between internal and external perspectives. Further evaluating the potential impacts and tradeoffs in the next step can help you make more fully informed decisions about where to focus.

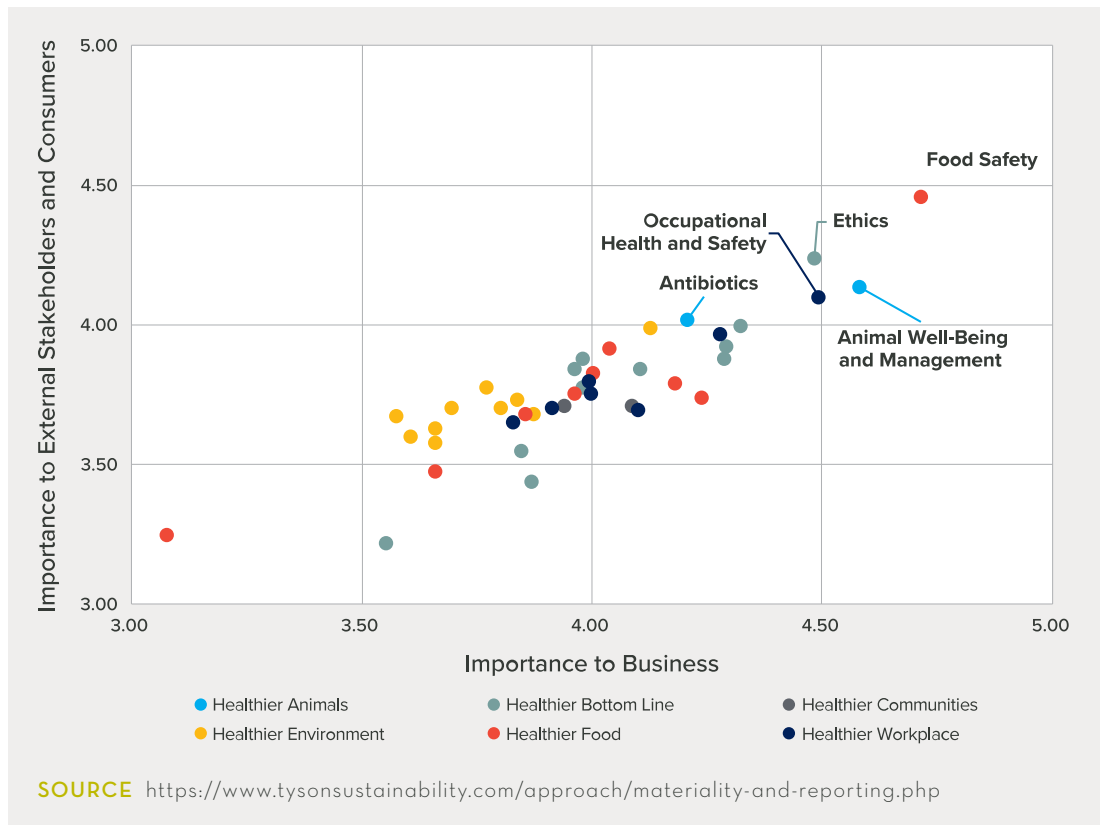
The results of your analysis can be displayed in a priorities matrix. The matrix plots sustainability issues by importance on two attributes on the X- and Y-axes. The most critical issues are found in the upper right quadrant of the matrix and issues of lesser importance appear in the lower left quadrant.

SAMPLE PRIORITIES MATRIX



SUSTAINABILITY MATERIALITY MATRIX

Tyson combined the results of a benchmarking study and stakeholder surveys to create a materiality matrix to identify and prioritize significant economic, environmental and social impacts to Tyson Foods' business, optimize sustainability investments, and align reporting with what matters most.



STEP SEVEN

Evaluate potential tradeoffs between the attributes identified as priorities

There are consequences and tradeoffs associated with many decisions related to sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Having a balanced evaluation of multiple attributes of sustainability will allow your company to determine which are most consistent with your values and business objectives and to effectively communicate your strategic decision to stakeholders. Research from the Center for Food Integrity shows that being able to explain how and why you make decisions is an important factor in building trust and reducing potential stakeholder outrage.

Any given agricultural or food production practice has an impact on one or more of the three large dimensions of sustainability: Environment, Economic and Social. It is important to consider the impact of a practice or policy on specific attributes across and within each dimension.

You cannot change one variable in a food production system without impacting other variables in the system. Recognizing that there are tradeoffs inherent within and across attributes and dimensions helps your organization optimize your sustainability strategy.

Evaluating Tradeoffs Process

▶ **STEP SEVEN . ONE** IDENTIFY ANY UNCOMPROMISABLE PRINCIPLES

Any consideration of tradeoffs must begin with identifying areas of uncompromising principles and acknowledging that decisions that would negatively affect these aspects are off-the-table. Food safety, worker safety, and endangered species habitat are a few examples of attributes that may be considered non-negotiable. These attributes should be clearly defined upfront to secure internal alignment on what won't be compromised for another attribute of sustainability under any circumstances.

The challenge in evaluating tradeoffs is that the analysis is nearly always incomplete due to the complexity of food production systems. It is difficult and not generally cost- or resource-effective to identify and quantify all potential impacts, and definitive research or data may not be available. For these reasons, the goal in evaluating tradeoffs primarily is to provide strategic direction using qualitative and quantitative data. In many cases you may be asked to assign a value to a specific sustainability attribute based on data and your priorities and current policy without complete information. While this process will not provide an “apples to apples” quantitative comparison, it does provide a framework that allows you to transparently evaluate sustainability tradeoffs.

▶ **STEP SEVEN . TWO** GATHER LIFE-CYCLE ASSESSMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY DATA

Begin by gathering objective, research- or experience-based data on the practices or policies to be evaluated. Information on potential impacts can be found from various groups identified in the Resources section at the end of this document. A commodity or trade association may have analyzed a specific practice, or if the subject is of broad interest, may agree to conduct one as a service to its members. Universities, trade associations, government agencies and for-and non-profit organizations are all potential sources for information or can suggest other resources to aid in your analysis.

Keep in mind the credibility of the source and information. The gold standard for research is publication in a peer-reviewed journal. This means the research has passed the rigor of review by other experts in the field and meets the standards for publication by the research journal's editors. Research of this caliber takes time and resources to conduct and may be very narrowly focused but can be considered very credible when available. An analysis or literature review of existing research on a topic can also be very informative when done objectively and comprehensively. “Cherry picking” which studies are included to favor a particular point-of-view can be a temptation when conducting this type of research so be alert for this type of bias when evaluating such studies, or when approached with study results from an organization advocating for a specific position. Your own internal experts' knowledge and experience, in conjunction with or in lieu of outside research, may provide the most accurate and relevant information on how a decision may impact your company. Their

in-depth understanding of your systems and processes can identify possible unintended consequences of changes that aren't apparent to those outside the organization.

Once you have gathered the available information you can begin weighing the inevitable tradeoffs. Recognize that there is often tension between economic and environmental or social dimensions, particularly if technological solutions have not yet been developed for an issue. A practice that is better for the environment may be more expensive, at least initially, and may negatively impact the economic attribute of profitability or social attribute of food affordability. Strategies to address this issue may include establishing return-on-investment criteria (prioritize break-even or positive ROI projects) or committing to invest in improved processes or in research to develop more cost-effective solutions.

Efficiency is generally considered an economic consideration but in reality can have environmental and social benefits. A good example is land use. Green Revolution pioneer Norman Borlaug advocated increasing crop yields as a means to curb deforestation. Farming intensification is economically positive in most cases, using less land, water and energy to produce a certain yield. However, every system has a tipping point where additional gains are no longer practical (the Pareto principle) so the goal should be to optimize rather than strictly maximizing efficiency.

▶ **STEP SEVEN . THREE** **SUMMARIZE THE DATA**

As you evaluate the implications of various practices, one method for summarizing the information is a simple chart with arrows or other symbols to represent the impacts of various attributes on sustainability dimension. We will use arrows - up, down and sideways - to indicate a positive, negative or neutral impact in that area.

As shown in the examples that follow, you begin the process by creating a chart for the policy or practice under consideration that includes columns for each sustainability dimension (Environment, Economic and Social) and then list the attributes or indicators which are a priority for your organization under each dimension. Using available information, determine whether the practice will have a positive, negative or neutral impact on each attribute area.

The following chart includes high-level examples of this type of summary. We've provide a template to create charts for practices specific to your organization. You may choose to include more aspects under each dimension for a more comprehensive evaluation. Be careful to avoid "analysis paralysis," that is, getting bogged down in quantifying every aspect or not making a decision because there isn't sufficient data. Remember that this is intended to be directional vs. definitive, and will reflect the values and priorities of your organization as well as available knowledge and technology at this point in time.

Please visit OptimizingSustainability.org for a library of tradeoff case studies and other resources for evaluating tradeoffs.

EVALUATING TRADEOFFS EXAMPLE

EXAMPLES	PRACTICE/POLICY	ENVIRONMENTAL ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT	ECONOMIC ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT	SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT
Egg Production	Cage-free eggs ¹	GHG emissions Air quality	↓ ↓	Egg production Food Affordability Cost of production	↓ ↓ ↓	Food Safety ✗ Worker Safety ✗ Hen mortality Natural behaviors	↓ ↓ ↓ ↑
Corn Production	No till/conservation tillage ²	Soil health Water quality	↑ ↑	Equipment costs Yield Food affordability	↔ ↑ ↔	Nutritional content Labor	↔ ↑
Milk Production	rBST-free milk ³	GHG emissions Land use Water use Carbon footprint	↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Food affordability Milk yield Farmer profit	↔ ↔ ↔	Nutritional content Human Health ✗ Animal Health ✗	↔ ↔ ↔
Broiler Production	Slower growing birds ⁴	Water use Manure production Land use	↓ ↓ ↓	Food affordability Feed costs	↓ ↓	Animal Welfare ✗	↔
<p>SOURCES</p> <p>(1) Coalition for Sustainable Egg Production</p> <p>(2) USDA Agriculture Research Service, University of California, Davis</p> <p>(3) Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy</p> <p>(4) National Chicken Council</p>							
<p>↑ POSITIVE IMPACT</p> <p>↓ NEGATIVE IMPACT</p> <p>↔ NO/NEUTRAL IMPACT</p> <p>✗ NON-NEGOTIABLE</p>							

EVALUATING TRADEOFFS TEMPLATE

PRACTICE/POLICY	ENVIRONMENTAL ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT	ECONOMIC ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT	SOCIAL ATTRIBUTES	IMPACT
<p>↑ POSITIVE IMPACT</p> <p>↓ NEGATIVE IMPACT</p> <p>↔ NO/NEUTRAL IMPACT</p> <p>✗ NON-NEGOTIABLE</p>	<p>SOURCES</p>					

▶ **STEP SEVEN . FOUR** **EVALUATE THE RESULTING TRADEOFFS**

Be cognizant of the tradeoffs as you evaluate your sustainability priorities. Are the tradeoffs acceptable? Can they be minimized or mitigated in some way? If not, consider a strategy to invest in research or technology in one or more areas that may allow mitigation in the future.

STEP EIGHT

Finalize priorities and rationale

Taking into consideration the preferences of various stakeholders, alignment with company values and business objectives and the tradeoffs between various sustainability attributes will provide a prioritized list of sustainability goals. These goals can then be translated into strategies and operationalized into department and functional goals and initiatives.

MEASUREMENT

Once you have selected your sustainability priorities, establishing your starting points - benchmarks - and ongoing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are vital for assessing and communicating your progress. There are already well-established sustainability programs that have measured and benchmarked sustainability performance, hence determining KPIs and measuring sustainability is outside of the scope of this framework. Many excellent resources already exist, including the Global Reporting Initiative, Global Environmental Management Initiative, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative, Sustainability Accounting Standards Board, and others.

COMMUNICATIONS

Congratulations! You've developed a strategic, information- and values-based sustainability strategy with input from a diverse set of stakeholders. You've operationalized your plan, and are measuring your progress against KPIs. However, having a strategy and measuring your progress is not enough. Transparency is required to meet today's consumers' expectations. Sharing your strategy on an ongoing basis through proactive communication is key to building and maintaining trust. You've done the hard work. Now get credit for it by sharing your story. Whether that is by simply making information available on a website or conducting a proactive communications program, communicating your strategy is a necessary step to address questions or concerns from interested stakeholders, reassure supporters that you are doing the right thing, and stave off criticism or attacks from others.

Creating a strategic communications program is beyond the scope of this document. Internal communications professionals or external public relations or marketing partners can assist in this very important step.

Appendix

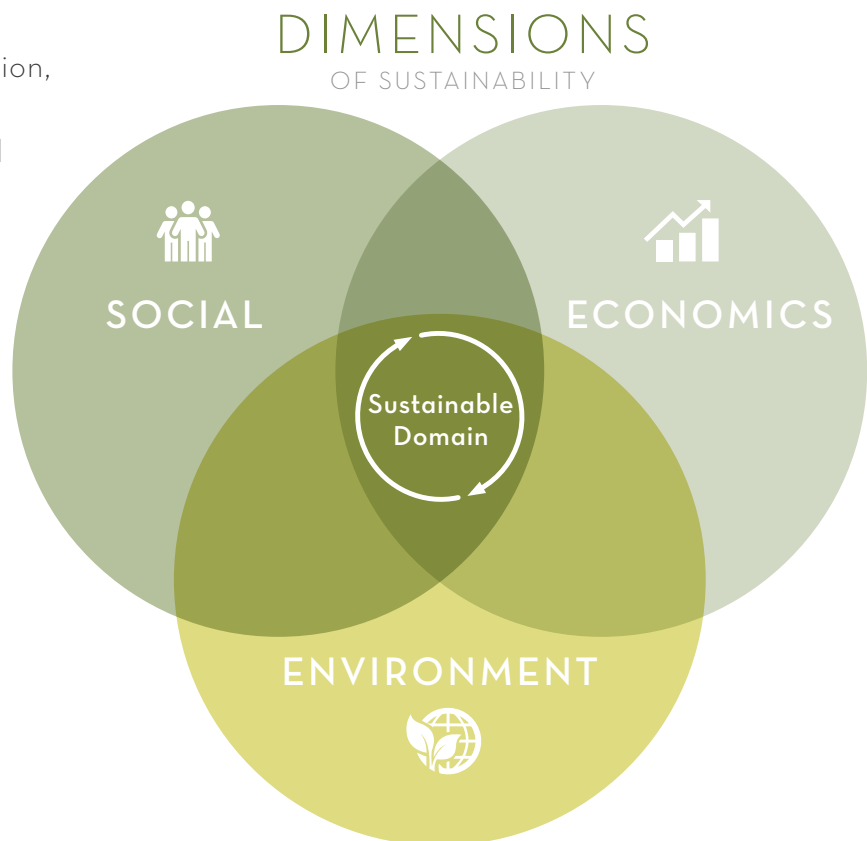
FOOD SYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSIONS & ATTRIBUTES

Sustainability was originally synonymous with being “green.” Yet the environment is only one of three areas generally recognized as comprising a sustainable business enterprise. While sustainability still maintains a strong association with environmental attributes today’s definition can also include health and wellness, animal welfare, treatment of workers, food waste, packaging, impact on local and indigenous communities, and a range of additional issues that impact people, animals and the planet.

For the purposes of this document, we will refer to Dimensions and Attributes of sustainability with the following definitions. In our research, we captured dozens of potential dimensions and 265 attributes in the growing realm of sustainability and CSR.

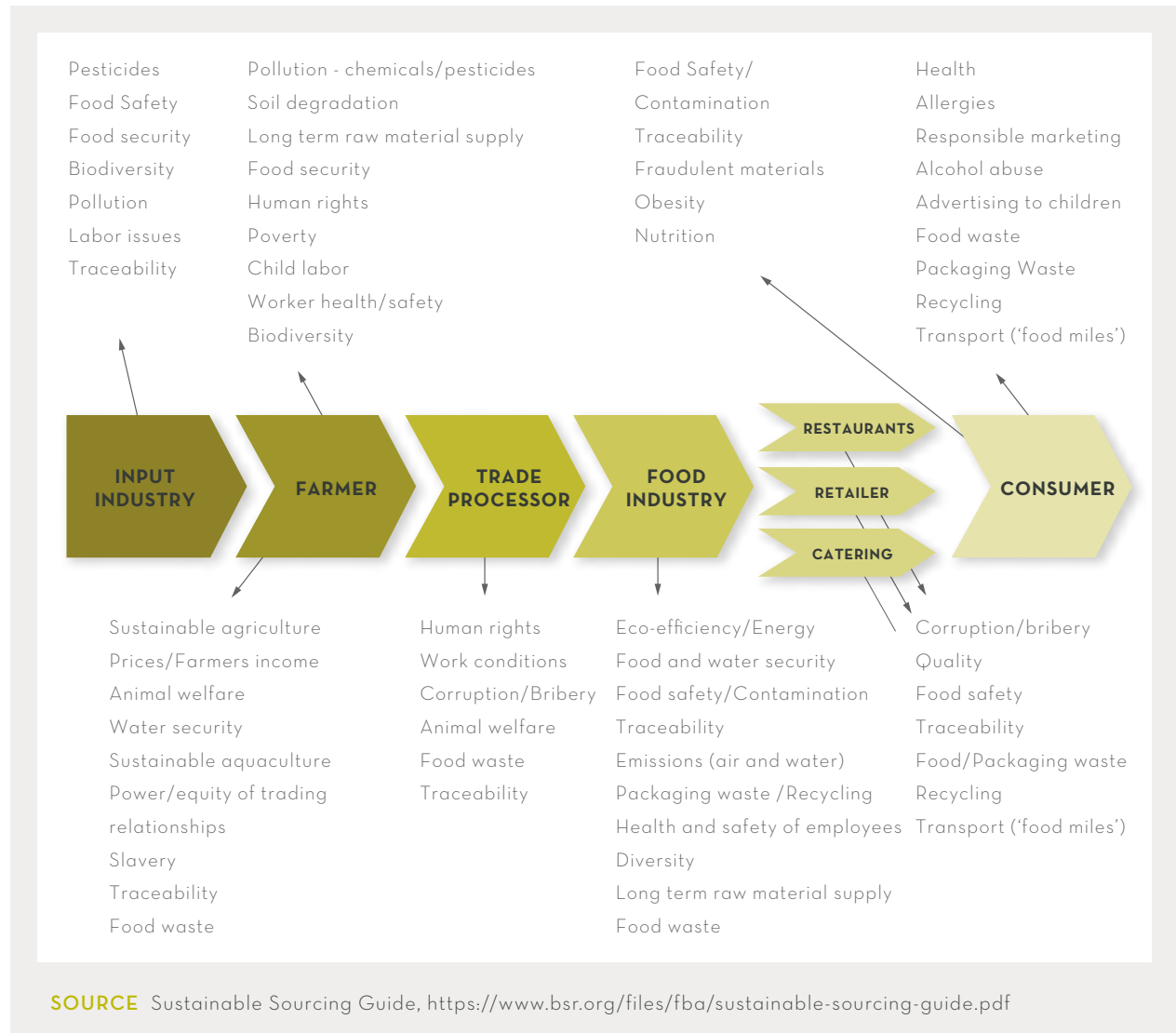
DIMENSION A category or broad area of sustainability, generally recognized as the Big Three of Environment, Social and Economic. Other organizations may use Categories or Indicator Categories interchangeably with Dimension. Environmental Protection, Social Development and Economic Prosperity are alternative descriptions. Some companies may elevate specific areas of focus to the level of dimension, for example Animal Welfare, to indicate its importance to the organization.

ATTRIBUTE
A variable within a dimension, i.e. attributes for the Social dimension of animal welfare might include shelter, food and water, mortality and morbidity, ability to express natural behavior, etc. Other organizations may use Aspects or Performance Indicators as synonyms for Attribute.



This graphic illustrates the scope and complexity of attributes that can be relevant to the food system.

ISSUES IN THE FOOD & BEVERAGE INDUSTRY DIAGRAM



Regardless of the terms you choose to use, what is most important is to be transparent about your priorities and how you are measuring them.

Resources

SUSTAINABILITY ORGANIZATIONS & PROGRAMS

- ▶ **American National Standard for Sustainable Agriculture**
<http://www.leonardoacademy.org/services/standards/agstandard.html>
- ▶ **B Corporation** <https://www.bcorporation.net/>
- ▶ **Conservation Technology Information Center**
<http://www.ctic.purdue.edu/CTIC%20HOME/ABOUT%20CTIC/>
- ▶ **Environmental Defense Fund Sustainable Supply Chains**
<http://business.edf.org/projects/featured/sustainable-supply-chains/>
- ▶ **Field to Market** <https://fieldtomarket.org/>
- ▶ **Global Reporting Institute** <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx>
- ▶ **Global Environmental Management Initiative** <http://gemi.org/>
- ▶ **International Seafood Sustainability Foundation** <http://iss-foundation.org/>
- ▶ **National Dairy FARM Program** <http://www.nationaldairyfarm.com/>
- ▶ **Sustainable Agriculture Initiative** <http://www.saiplatform.org/>
- ▶ **Sustainability Accounting Standards Board** <https://www.sasb.org/>
- ▶ **Sustainable Seafood Coalition** <http://www.sustainableseafoodcoalition.org/>
- ▶ **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/sustainability-resource-finder>
- ▶ **U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef** <https://www.usrsb.org/>
- ▶ **University of Arkansas Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability** <http://cars.uark.edu/>
- ▶ **University of California, Davis Agricultural Sustainability Institute** <http://asi.ucdavis.edu/>
- ▶ **USDA Economic Research Service** <https://www.ers.usda.gov/>
- ▶ **USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture** <https://nifa.usda.gov/>
- ▶ **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service** <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/>

COMMODITY/TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

An online directory of agriculture commodity organizations and trade associations can be found at <https://www.agmrc.org/directories-state-resources/related-directories/national-commodity-and-agricultural-organization-sites>

If you need additional resources, please contact CFI. We're happy to connect you to organizations that have data to help inform your decision-making process.



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Contact The Center for Food Integrity for more information
at learnmore@foodintegrity.org or [816.880.5360](tel:816.880.5360)



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