

THE PATHWAY TO HARMONISED METRICS FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY

BACKGROUND

The food system is hugely complex, with numerous actors across the value chain. Reflecting this complexity, a huge number of frameworks and methods for defining, quantifying and managing the environmental risks and impacts of food have been developed. The plethora of metrics and initiatives can be both overwhelming and conflicting.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) White Paper on common metrics for Sustainable Value Creation highlighted the challenge of the “existence of multiple environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting frameworks and the lack of consistency and comparability of metrics as pain points preventing companies from credibly demonstrating to all stakeholders their progress on sustainability and their contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”.¹ The ability to consistently measure environmental impact along the supply chain is also vital to understanding the footprint of the entire food sector and where progress is and is not being made.

WWF’s vision is of a harmonised system for measuring the impact of food on the environment, using robust metrics, responding to user needs, and with consensus across actors for a go-to framework to inform decisions about sustainable food production and consumption.

WWF-UK commissioned a study with Anthesis to better understand the needs of users of sustainability metrics across the UK food sector, and the barriers to, and opportunities for, driving greater alignment of those metrics in the various frameworks and initiatives currently used.

This involved conducting a survey and interviews with a sample of stakeholders from across the sector, including representatives from food producers, retailers, investors, academics, NGOs and government. The surveys and interviews provided a snapshot of the food industry’s views of the most material environmental risks and impacts to 2030, the current initiatives and metrics used to measure and manage those risks and impacts, appetite for greater harmonisation of metrics, and perceived barriers to such harmonisation. It also sought to understand how WWF can best support efforts towards greater alignment of sustainability frameworks and metrics.

KEY FINDINGS

Existing industry initiatives and views towards harmonisation

Survey responses suggested a broad consensus that harmonised metrics can benefit the food system, with 75% of respondents seeing a clear benefit and the remaining 25% seeing the benefits, but acknowledging barriers (the latter including academic and investor participants).

The study also pointed to a plethora of existing, scalable initiatives and metrics that support the food sector to measure and manage their sustainability risks and impacts. Industry views confirmed that the priority should be on seeing how these existing initiatives can work together to catalyse greater

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/measuring-stakeholder-capitalism-towards-common-metrics-and-consistent-reporting-of-sustainable-value-creation>

alignment of science, methods and data to support harmonisation across the industry, rather than reinventing the wheel by developing new frameworks and metrics.

The common characteristics of existing initiatives that contribute to their robustness, credibility, scalability and, therefore, wider industry uptake are:

- Strong governance structures and engagement of a wide range of stakeholders. This can enable continuous development while incorporating the interests of different stakeholders, ensuring user confidence, uptake at scale and consumer trust.
- Alignment with relevant laws, across geographies where relevant; incorporation of up-to-date science and methods aligned to internationally recognised standards; and alignment in metrics / indicators used with multiple other initiatives.
- Robust methods of data collection and verification, including the granularity of data collected, both of which are key to driving trust and confidence in an initiatives' assessments.

What are the key barriers to harmonisation of metrics?

The surveys and interviews highlighted the following key barriers to achieving harmonisation:

1. Evolving science and methods of evaluating environmental impact and risk:

Survey responses showed that alignment to credible science and methods is viewed as the most important factor considered when adopting new sustainability metrics / initiatives. However, the science and methods underpinning the measurement of environmental risk and impact are dynamic and evolving rapidly in some cases, which makes industry alignment on common, scientifically credible metrics difficult.

2. Varying data and methods across geographies and commodities:

Similarly, the data and methods for measuring environmental risk and impact differ across commodities, production systems and geographies. As food companies have different priority sourcing areas and commodities, aligning on metrics across the sector to enable comparison is challenging.

3. Data collection, availability and governance:

The collection, sharing and governance of the data that underpin measurement of environmental risks and impacts in a competitive market is incredibly complex. Firstly, there is still a lack of consistent, granular data across key food producing regions to measure environmental risk and impact and inform comparisons. Secondly, where data does exist, many data owners and businesses are concerned that sharing data diminishes their competitive advantage.

What is needed to overcome these barriers?

Insights from the survey and interviews, as well as the review of metrics / initiatives, were synthesised to produce the following three areas of work which are necessary to drive harmonisation of sustainability metrics across the food sector.

1. Facilitating greater collaboration across the food sector

Moving towards consensus on sustainability metrics requires collaboration of actors across the sector. There is clear appetite for collaboration, as shown by multi-stakeholder initiatives already in progress, such as the [Global Farm Metric](#) and [WRAP](#)'s work on water security. Initiatives with greater uptake across the sector tend to be co-developed with stakeholders, creating buy-in and accountability from the outset. These initiatives should provide the starting point for cross-sector discussions on harmonisation of metrics, to build on existing collaboration and avoid duplication of efforts.

Facilitating further collaboration will require a deeper understanding of the drivers to collaborate (such as the rise in investor interest in sustainability or the need to mitigate similar environmental risks in a shared sourcing location or supply base), and the value in doing so (such as reduced duplication of data collection for farmers or cost efficiencies for retailers).

2. Progressing the science: Establishing gaps and overlaps, while retaining flexibility

The science and methods underpinning the measurement of environmental risks and impacts are more developed in some areas (e.g. greenhouse gas emissions) than others (e.g. soil health) and this may be reflected in the corresponding metrics. There are also sustainability initiatives that capture information on the same environmental themes, using similar metrics. A detailed mapping of metrics across different sustainability frameworks / initiatives could usefully identify where gaps in metrics exist, or where similar metrics or indicators are used in multiple frameworks and could be consolidated or otherwise integrated.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the goal of aligning the measurement and reporting of environmental risk and impact is to drive behaviour change across the food system, rather than achieving harmonised metrics as an end in themselves. Participants emphasised the importance of striking a balance between the scientific credibility of metrics / initiatives and their simplicity (to encourage broad uptake and integration into existing decision-making processes).

Participants also expressed a preference for frameworks that focus on overarching metrics on strategic themes, but which allow organisations to set their own detailed KPIs that are relevant to their specific needs. For this reason, corporate reporting standards like [SASB](#) and [GRI](#), and environmental reporting initiatives like the [Science-based Targets initiative](#), which provide a common framework but enable flexibility in how organisations measure and address their specific environmental risks, are gaining traction. This flexibility can also allow more detailed metrics to evolve as the underlying science progresses.

3. Technology and data

Data sharing can create value through avoiding duplication of efforts and reduced cost of data collection or access to financial incentives. Further data sharing could also drive harmonisation, for example by integrating recognised data sharing mechanisms like the [CDP database](#) with other reporting frameworks, or greater use of technologies that enable data sharing across supply chains and with other stakeholders like investors.

Data management and governance must ensure that both suppliers of data and users trust that the data provided is credible and can provide robust, consistent comparisons. Independent third-party governance of environmental data is therefore essential to retain industry trust so that no individual organisation has an unfair advantage through access or influence.

This study suggested that a combination of a harmonised framework focused on core environmental themes of global food production, coupled with greater market access to a shared pool of, largely open source, environmental data that evidences the performance against these themes, may be a more effective approach to engage industry and drive behaviour change.

MAKING THE LINKS TO WWF'S CURRENT WORK

The industry perspectives obtained through this study and the recommended work areas to overcome the barriers to harmonised metrics align with several food industry initiatives WWF-UK is involved in. This study helpfully makes the case for WWF's continued involvement in these initiatives and provides recommendations on how to leverage them to drive the harmonisation of metrics. A summary of some of these key initiatives is set out below.

- **The WWF Basket:** WWF-UK recently launched the [WWF Basket](#), a set of outcomes and measures to help UK retailers to achieve our ambitious aim to halve the environmental impact of UK baskets by 2030. The WWF Basket focuses on seven of the most urgent areas of environmental impact and sets out practical actions and indicators (linked to existing certifications and other initiatives) in a Blueprint for Action. We are seeking to align the Basket's metrics with the Food Foundation's [Plating up Progress](#) initiative, which is used to benchmark all UK food businesses, not just retailers. The Basket also provides an opportunity to convene retailers and seek consensus on appropriate metrics.
- **HESTIA:** WWF-UK funded the first phase of [HESTIA](#), an online platform that allows researchers and producers to share data on the environmental impact of different food products and production practices. This first phase focused on developing the methodology (including a metric for biodiversity loss) and core platform to allow harmonised storage, tracking and decision-making on the environmental impact of food, enabling transition towards a more sustainable food system. Continuing our support of HESTIA will be critical as this study has identified that an open-source database on the environmental impact of food will be crucial to enable greater alignment of metrics.
- **National Food Strategy advocacy:** The [National Food Strategy](#) (NFS) independent review recommends, among other things, the establishment of a National Food System Data Programme which could (using HESTIA), provide the trusted, open-source database that drives better alignment on metrics and benchmarking. The NFS also proposes mandatory reporting and food labelling, and our advocacy on this presents a good opportunity to ensure such reporting drives alignment, rather than proliferation, of sustainability metrics. The metrics that underpin mandatory reporting and food labelling may drive convergence across the sector, so it is important that these metrics reflect industry needs and include a mechanism for review as science progresses.
- **Sustainable Food Trust - Global Farm Metric:** The [Global Farm Metric](#) (GFM) is a self-assessment tool for farmers to collect consistent, on-farm data across a range of environmental themes. Although centred around data collection, the GFM is intended to be used across the supply chain, including the finance sector, for example through preferential interest rates for farmers scoring higher on the GFM framework. WWF is involved in the working groups set up to further develop the GFM, including the metrics and international working group. Our metrics study highlighted the GFM as an initiative with significant industry buy-in through multi-stakeholder working groups, and as a framework which could drive harmonisation of data and metrics.
- **Food Foundation – Plating up Progress:** The [World Benchmarking Alliance](#) (WBA) develops sectoral benchmarks to compare companies' performance on the SDGs, backed by the best available science and leveraging existing norms and standards and WWF is one of the many ally organisations supporting the WBA. The Food Foundation and WBA have developed [Plating up Progress](#), a benchmark for the UK food industry based on their progress towards healthy, just and sustainable food systems, using ten topic areas and underlying metrics. WWF is working with Plating up Progress to align on metrics for the WWF Basket, to avoid duplication of data collection and effort by retailers who choose to provide information for assessment under both frameworks.
- **Commodity / region-specific alliances:** WWF has alliances with commodity- and region-specific groups, like the [Cerrado Manifesto](#), the [Retail Soy Group](#) and the [Soy Transparency Coalition](#), which could provide useful forums to progress harmonised metrics and achieve consensus in a sub-sector. The [Accountability Framework initiative](#) (AFi) is progressed as a reference for definitions in all soy-related zero deforestation and zero conversion initiative.

The diagram on the following page lays out WWF-UK's vision for how information about the environmental impact of the UK food industry flows from farm or landscape level through to consumers, as well as the voluntary and mandatory targets set, and actions planned or taken, to reduce that impact. It seeks to demonstrate how key food industry initiatives, including those listed above, could work together to drive harmonisation of metrics and food system transformation.



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COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL DATA AND PROGRESS

HOW DO WE GET THERE? (ACTIONS)

WHERE DO WE NEED TO BE TO SOLVE THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE? (TARGETS)

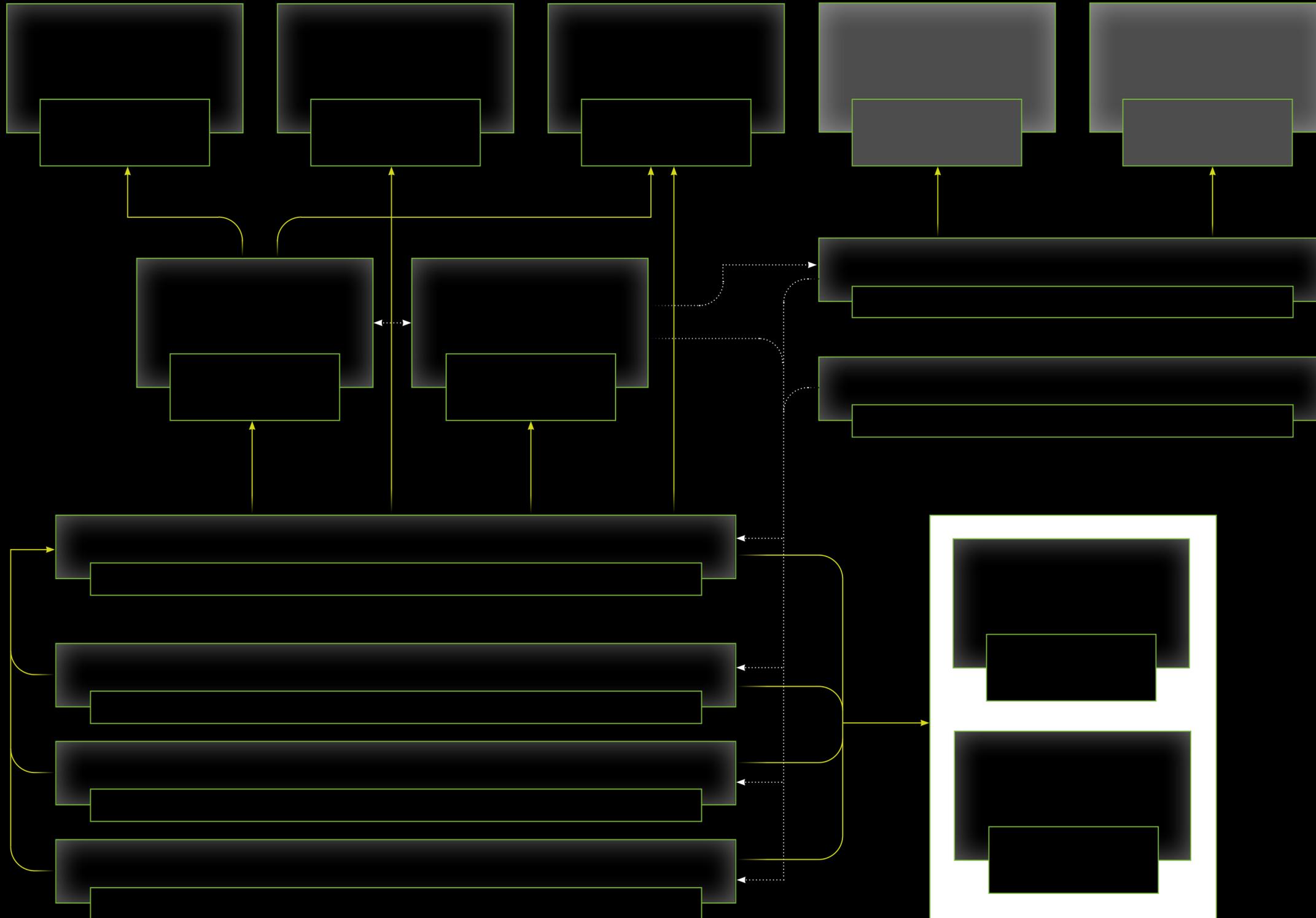
VERIFYING ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

WHAT IS HAPPENING...

IN SUPPLY CHAINS?

AT LANDSCAPE LEVEL?

ON FARM?



METRICS, DEFINITIONS & METHODOLOGIES AT EACH STAGE IDEALLY ALIGNED OR NESTED

KEY

