SAFA
A Long-awaited Step Forward to Understanding and Acting Upon Sustainability in the Food and Agriculture Sectors

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ABSTRACT
The world is confronted with a multitude of crises, from food and fuel crises to climate and financial crises. Tackling these challenges would be greatly facilitated by a common language for sustainability and accountability that integrates all dimensions of sustainability. Experience with the development of sustainability and its implementation is still limited. The perception on what sustainability entails differs widely among stakeholders. FAO has developed Guidelines for the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA), which are the result of three years of participatory development, together with practitioners from civil society and private sector. They are a first step into international harmonization of the requirements which underpin sustainable production, manufacturing and retailing of food and agriculture products. SAFA defines what sustainable food and agriculture systems are, including environmental integrity, economic resilience, social well-being and good governance; it outlines a procedure for an integrated analysis of all dimensions of sustainability, including the selection of appropriate indicators and rating of sustainability performance (i.e. best, good, moderate or insufficient); and it describes sustainability themes, sub-themes and indicators. SAFA does not replace existing systems, but set a frame to which such systems can be related. Running a SAFA results in a "sustainability polygon" that presents the performance of each of the 20 themes that are crucial to sustainability. There is still a lot of work ahead until the final version of the SAFA Guidelines is released, however as of mid next year it can already be used. SAFA can become a huge step forward to sustainability, depending on its reception most importantly by food companies and retailers.

Keywords: sustainability assessment, accountability, food chain, footprints, SAFA, resilience.

Agriculture, pastoralism, forestry and fisheries provide livelihoods for approximately 2.6 billion people (or some 40 percent of global population), let alone providing food necessary for everybody's life and wellbeing. However, such activities have direct impacts on most natural resources. In fact, agriculture and forests occupy over 60 percent of Earth surface, fishery activities can be found on virtually any marine and terrestrial water body and farming uses 70

percent of global water withdrawals. The food production sector had the largest environmental cost footprint among the 11 sectors analysed in 2010 at US$200 billion (KPMG, 2012); these costs could actually outweigh their entire earnings. Furthermore, agriculture is among the three most dangerous activities (alongside construction and mining), counting 170 000 work-related deaths annually (one third due to pesticides) and up to 4 million poisoning; workers are twice as likely to die at work than in any other sector. A recent study (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012) showed that most jobs in the food system in the USA provide low wages with little access to health benefits and opportunities for advancement; only 13.5 percent of all food workers surveyed earned a livable wage and in general they face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce. The sound or careless management of the food and agriculture sector varies from enormous opportunities in the provision of goods and services to serious environmental and social concerns.

Sustainability has had as many definitions as people who have tried to define it. It has been a major challenge of the last decades to conceptualize and especially put into practice all the elements thought should be part of it. In the search for sustainability, new ideas, tools, projects have been emerging almost on a daily basis, yet we are far away from any system that is 'sustainable' (i.e. continued indefinitely) while environmental and other resources are increasingly scarce. FAO has defined sustainable development as "the management and conservation of the natural resource base, and the orientation of technological and institutional change in such a manner as to ensure the attainment and continued satisfaction of human needs for present and future generations. Such sustainable development (in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors) conserves land, water, plant and animal genetic resources, is environmentally non-degrading, technically appropriate, economically viable and socially acceptable"(FAO, 1989).

Apart from the definition, developing and implementing an integrated approach to analyzing different sustainability dimensions as a coherent whole and integrating them in development or business strategies remains a second major challenge. The list of countries having established national strategies for sustainable development is over a hundred. The list of companies doing corporate responsibility reporting is several thousands. The list of methods and standards enabling to quantify environmental and social impacts of products and services is several dozens. Food companies have started to respond to the increasing consumer pressure of making their products safer, healthier, fair and environmentally-friendlier. To do so, they are assessing the performance of their suppliers and producers on different aspects (environmental, social, economic) and with different criteria. Most voluntary sustainability initiatives have predominantly environmental criteria; social criteria is related mostly to health, safety and employment conditions; and economic criteria, if exist at all, is limited to product quality and minimum wage requirements. None of the existing approaches in food and agriculture simultaneously covers all dimensions of sustainability and the whole supply chain, including production, processing, transportation and marketing. Since there is no international benchmark defining what "sustainable production" actually entails, companies are free to determine what they see as sustainable. Chiefly, the proliferation of sustainability definitions, tools and projects has not contributed to improving sustainability in the agriculture sector, while various claims place a burden on producers and traders and frustrate consumers in the market place.

The numerous sustainability approaches have been brought together into a coherent whole through the FAO Guidelines for Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA). During the last three years, FAO has embarked on a process to define a methodology which can assess sustainability within the food and agriculture sectors building on existing efforts. The Test version 1.0 of the SAFA Guidelines was published in June 2012 with the view to pilot test the proposed methodology in selected countries and value chains before finalizing it by mid-2013. This article attempts to introduce the essence of SAFA, highlighting its strengths and the challenges ahead before stepping-up on the global stage of sustainability assessments.

The Guidelines are thus the result of an iterative process, built on the cross-comparisons of codes of practice, corporate reporting, standards, indicators and other technical protocols currently used by companies and organizations that implement sustainability tools. The Guidelines do not replace existing systems, but set a frame to which such systems can be related. The structure and methodology draw specifically upon: ISO 14040:2006, the ISEAL Code of Good Practice, the Reference Tools of the Global Social Compliance Programme and the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines and Food Sector Supplement of the Global Reporting Initiative (version 3.1).

The story of SAFA

Conceptual framework for sustainability (2009): An expert meeting was held to review how sustainability tools were being assessed by different stakeholders, and internal discussions within FAO and ISEAL took place.
Mapping sustainability indicators (2010): FAO compiled a list of performance indicators, based on the review of dozens of corporate responsibility, social and environmental standards and sustainability reports of food chain actors.
First SAFA E-forum (February-March 2011): The proposed SAFA scope and indicators were discussed and a total of 246 people from 61 countries registered as participants during the five-weeks E-forum.
Stakeholders' survey (April - August 2011): Feedback during the survey was received from 18 industry and multi-stakeholder institutions; 15 NGOs and public institutions; and 8 scientific institutions.
Cross-comparison of standards and indicator sets (September-December 2011): The proposed set of the SAFA indicator topics was refined through an extensive screening of 18 industry standards, 5 farm-level systems, 4 systems of multilateral institutions, 7 NGO systems, 5 roundtable standards, and 5 other systems.
Second SAFA E-forum (January-February 2012): FAO was seeking stakeholders' views on the draft SAFA Guidelines, including the SAFA concept and process of development and implementation. During the two E-Forums, 410 people from 77 countries subscribed.
Expert Meeting (April 2012): FAO hosted a meeting with a dozen stakeholders to share concerns raised during the E-Forums and to discuss key issues prior to finalizing the Test Version of the SAFA Guidelines.
SAFA Pilot Phase (October 2012 to February 2013): After the publication of the Test Version, the process entered its pilot phase to test the smooth applicability, usefulness, acceptance and scientific soundness of the Guidelines.

A SAFA can address all entities in the value chain from the site of primary production (agriculture, fisheries, forestry) to that of final sales to the consumer. However it can also be limited to a single production site or step of the value chain. SAFA is not a sustainability index, nor a sustainability standard, nor a labelling tool. SAFA defines what sustainable food and agriculture systems are, including environmental integrity, economic resilience, social well-being and good governance – all defined through themes and sub-themes that apply to any level. SAFA proposes a procedure for an integrated analysis of all dimensions of sustainability, whereby sustainability themes are assessed and rated according to appropriate performance indicators. The vizualisation of how an activity fares (i.e. best, good, moderate or insufficient) takes the form of dashboard that highlights areas of strength and weaknesses. Ultimately, the objective is to support management and point towards themes requiring attention in order to improve their performance. Thus, sustainability assessments based on the SAFA Guidelines serve internal management and business-to-business communication.

The SAFA Guidelines provide procedures and protocols for the four sustainability pillars (environmental, social, economic and governance), sub-divided in 20 sustainability themes, 62 sub-themes a set of hundred example indicators.

Table 1: SAFA sustainability dimensions, sustainability themes (left) and sub-themes (right).

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
GOOD GOVERNANCE PILLAR	
Governance structure	Corporate ethics; Due diligence
Accountability	Holistic audits; Responsibility
Participation	Stakeholder dialogue; Grievance procedures; Conflict resolution
Rule of law	Commitment to fairness and legitimacy; Remedy, restoration and prevention; Co-responsibility; Resource appropriation
Holistic management	Sustainability in management; Certified production and sourcing; Full-cost accounting
ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY PILLAR	
Atmosphere	Greenhouse gases; Air pollution
Freshwater	Water quantity; Water quality
Land	Organic matter; Physical structure; Chemical quality; Land degradation and desertification
Biodiversity	Habitat diversity and connectivity; Ecosystem integrity; Wild biodiversity; Agricultural biodiversity; Threatened species
Materials and energy	Non-renewable resources; Energy supply; Eco-efficiency; Waste disposal
Animal welfare	Freedom from stress; Species-appropriate conditions
ECONOMIC RESILIENCE PILLAR	
Investment	Internal investment; Community investment; Long-ranging investment
Vulnerability	Stability of supply; Stability of demand; Liquidity and insurance; Employment; Stability of production
Product safety and quality	Product information; Traceability; Food safety; Food quality
Local economy	Value creation; Local procurement
SOCIAL WELL-BEING PILLAR	
Decent livelihood	Wage level; Capacity building
Labour rights	Employment relations; Forced labour; Child labour; Freedom of association and bargaining; Working hours
Equity	Non-discrimination; Gender equality; Support to vulnerable people
Human health and safety	Physical and psycho-social health; Health resources; Food security
Cultural diversity	Indigenous knowledge; Food sovereignty

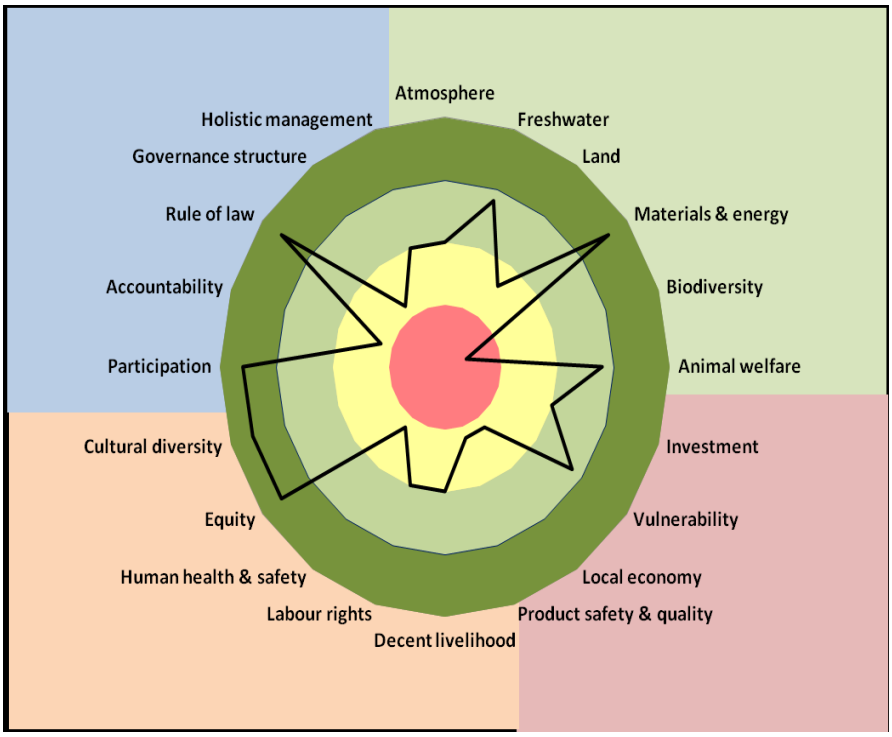
Sustainability performance must be assessed for every relevant SAFA theme and sub-theme. Part of these can be omitted as they may not be relevant for a certain type of enterprise (e.g. the "Land" theme will usually be irrelevant for fisheries), or the enterprise already participate in, or is certified, according to scheme(s) aiming at quality management or improved environmental, social and governance performance (e.g. organic, fair trade). Thus, only those sustainability themes and sub-themes need to be assessed that are applicable to the given situation and have not yet been covered by other standards or certification schemes. As of writing, the process of benchmarking the main sustainability tools against SAFA is on-going: this will allow SAFA users to skip aspects covered by sustainability standards/schemes that they adhere to.

Data collection can take different forms, e.g. a farm or factory visit, interviews with personnel, management, a stakeholder survey or data collection from public and other independent sources of

information. In small, poorly documented enterprises (e.g. most of the world's farms) almost all enterprise-related information will have to be collected via a farmer interview and a personal inspection of farm and fields. For some of the environmental themes (e.g. "Freshwater" and "Land"), doing field measurements and laboratory analyses is desirable, but not a must. Performance in relation with a SAFA is rated using one or more performance indicators for each sub-theme, such that the sub-theme scope is completely covered and in turn, the theme's objective met.

The communication of SAFA results require an aggregation of the obtained scores. This shall be done for sub-themes within a sustainability theme. A variety of aggregation approaches can be employed, depending on the purpose and target audience of the SAFA. Running a SAFA results in a sustainability polygon, over a traffic-light colour coding that depicts the performance of each of the 20 themes that are crucial to the environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions of sustainability (Figure 1). The "traffic light" representation highlights where an activity's performance is insufficient (red), moderate (orange), good (light green) or at best (dark green). The thick black line connects the scores between the sustainability issues. Thanks to this representation, an entity can quickly understand where it stands in the sustainability landscape and where it may need to forge partnerships to improve its performance. The correct application of the Guidelines is the responsibility of the implementing company.

Figure 1: Vizualisation of a SAFA sustainability polygon of a hypothetical enterprise.



Companies undertaking a SAFA should have the possibility of benefiting from the experiences of others and of striving for the best sustainability performance. Equally, in line with the transparency principle of the Bellagio STAMP18 (IISD, 2009), the public should have access to information that helps interested consumers understand how a SAFA was done. Therefore, information on the selected system boundaries, indicators, threshold values, data sources,

assumptions, etc. in each SAFA process should be made publicly accessible. This will allow companies operating in the same region or industry sector to use previously used SAFA configurations for orientation.

The pilot phase of testing the above described procedure has just started: the implementation of SAFA pilots will be conducted in a variety of settings and through consultations between FAO and participating stakeholders during the next half a year. The outcome of the pilot tests will be used to finalize the SAFA Guidelines. The principal goals of the pilot phase are to determine (a) whether the SAFA Guidelines are applicable in all foreseen contexts (including agriculture, forestry and fisheries production, food industry and retail, industrialised, and developing countries, and large and small-size enterprises) and (b) how they can be improved to ensure smooth applicability, usefulness, acceptance and scientific soundness.

Stakeholders that have tested SAFA will be invited to FAO in 2013 to share lessons. The resulting SAFA Guidelines will constitute a universal reference document. Already in its draft form, SAFA is functioning like a check-list for those seeking to cover all aspects f sustainability through planning, management and monitoring. More importantly, SAFA is raising awareness on the need to address trade-offs and build synergies between the environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions of development.

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