

# Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information

## Printout Self-Assessment tool

### Objective

This is the printout version of the online tool based on the United Nations Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information. The main objective of this tool is to offer an opportunity for organizations to self-assess and improve the way they are communicating with consumers about product sustainability (through marketing claims, labels, voluntary standards, product declarations, etc.). This tool also serves as a benchmarking tool to organizations that are currently developing new product sustainability information. Ultimately, with this self-assessment tool, the Consumer Information Programme aims to encourage organizations to align their product sustainability communications with the Guidelines, creating an international community of good practice. Please note that feedback will not be provided, as the objective of this tool is for you to promote a reflection process within your own organisation and teams, gaining insights and ideas on how to improve your current work.

### Non-disclosure

It is understood and agreed that the organizations may provide certain information that is and must be kept confidential. It is agreed that the Consumer Information Programme will not disclose any information provided without informed consent.

### How to complete the tool

This tool serves as a checklist following the Guidelines' 10 principles and allows you to analyse one specific product's sustainability information (a claim) of your choice (existing or in development) at a time.

As the questions cover different aspects of a claim (methodology, stakeholder engagement, communication, etc.), it might be necessary that you reach out to other relevant departments in your organisation. If you wish, it is possible for various persons to work on the questionnaire from different locations. You may click 'Save & Continue' to complete it in multiple sessions.

This tool is comprised of five sections. Each section states which part of the Guidelines it corresponds to, but you may wish to read the Guidelines in full first – please download the full resource for free [here](#). You should then proceed as follows:

1. Include your personal information and select the product sustainability claim that you will analyse in the exercise (claims can take multiple forms such as labels, voluntary standards and certification, product declarations, ratings, marketing claims, foot printing, life-cycle assessments, and other ways of communicating with consumers on environmental, social and economic issues connected to products).

2. Progress through the self-assessment tool reflecting on the claim in relation to the Mindset of the Guidelines.
3. Progress reflecting on the claim in relation to the Fundamental Principles.
4. Move towards the Aspirational Principles.
5. Learn, reflect and grow!

Should any questions arise at any point, you are welcome to get in touch with us at [ciscp@un.org](mailto:ciscp@un.org).

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Who are you?**

Mr./ Ms.

First name:

Last name:

Position:

Company/organisation name:

Organisation type:

Country/ies that company/ organisation is based in:

Email:

Website (optional):

Sector of analysed product claim:

### **What is your claim?**

Here you provide a description of your claim (existing or in development), including the exact wording or imagery of your claim (if applicable), and product(s) on which it can be seen.

Description:

If possible/applicable, here you can include an image of the claim.

Image:

## 2. MINDSET *(Please refer to the Guidelines pages 15-16)*

The mindset is neither a requirement nor an aspiration; it is a framework for applying the Guidelines.

### *Life Cycle Thinking*

Applying Life Cycle Thinking means going beyond the traditional focus on production site and manufacturing processes to include environmental, social and economic impacts of a product over its entire life cycle. Therefore, considering the whole product life cycle means that sustainability impacts are assessed for every stage of a product's life, from resource extraction to disposal.

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| Do you apply life cycle thinking for providing product sustainability claims? |  |
| If YES: Specify which stages of the product's life you are able to assess.    |  |
| If NO: Do you plan to do so? What are the main challenges?                    |  |

### *Hotspots Analysis*

To put life cycle thinking into practice, a hotspots analysis approach can be taken to identify the most impactful or relevant stages, activities, material and energy flows and impacts within a product's life cycle. This is important because once a given product's hotspots are identified, the main data that needs to be collected to define and communicate the product's sustainability information is that which relates to the hotspots.

Hotspots analysis is a methodological framework and guidance that helps provide focus and prioritization of efforts in an era of information overload. The key outcome is to identify where the greatest opportunity for improvement against an impact occurs, rather than communicating a precisely quantified current impact. Further guidance and examples for defining hotspots can be found in UN Environment's [Hotspots Analysis \(HSA\) Methodological Framework](#).

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| Do you apply a hotspots analysis approach to put life cycle thinking into practice? |  |
| If YES: Specify how the hotspots were identified.                                   |  |
| If NO: What are the main challenges?  |  |

### *Mainstreaming sustainability*

A product-related sustainability claim becomes an integrated part of the entire decision-making and management process for the development and marketing of new or improved products, or of a brand itself. Having clear goals and appropriate processes (including collaboration with stakeholders) in place helps companies to maintain and improve their products' performance over time and to apply this logic to other products in their portfolio and eventually mainstream sustainability in the entire organisation and its value chain. At the same time, it is important to enable consumers to distinguish between product sustainability and brand sustainability, and to not transfer brand-related claims to the product (unless this is substantiated) or vice versa.

Is the sustainability claim incorporated into the values of the whole brand/organization?  
*(For instance, a company that aims to make all products incrementally more sustainable; or a company that applies the same sustainability logic of the claim to all of its products)*

If YES: How is it done?

IF NO: Is it encouraged/ planned?

Is the sustainability claim product-specific so that consumers are able to distinguish product level and brand information?

If YES: How is it done?

IF NO: Is there a reason why?

## **3. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES**

The following five principles describe the fundamental criteria on which sustainability claims must be based, according to the Guidelines. If these are not fulfilled, you run the risk of greenwashing. The five fundamental principles seek to build and reinforce each other.



**Principle 1: Reliability** (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 18-21)

**Build your claims on a reliable basis**

- Ensure that the message conveyed follows and reflects the evidence you have (what has been measured or evaluated)
- Be sure, or obtain confirmation from the experts who provide the evidence, that their methods and data are state of the art
- Be aware of exclusions, limitations and assumptions that were used in building the evidence for the claim – and communicate them

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| <p>a) Is there a scientific basis for your claim and what has been measured or evaluated?<br/> <b>If YES: What is the scientific basis?</b><br/> <b>If NO: What is the basis for your claim?</b></p> <p>b) Are selected methods, standards and data endorsed or applied by governments, NGOs or competitors; or provided or backed by reliable scientific institutions?<br/> <b>YES</b><br/> <b>NO</b></p> |  |
| <p>c) How did you verify the information/ data? The claim is ...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Self-declared / self-assessed</li> <li>2- Peer-reviewed</li> <li>3- Third-party certified</li> </ol>  |  |
| <p>– IF 2/3 ABOVE: <b>Is the verifying organisation accredited to recognised standards or codes of practice?</b></p>   |  |
| <p>g) “If the claim is based on an expected change in consumer behaviour (e.g. improve environmental footprint by using less detergent, or higher recycling</p>  |  |

rates), what provides the evidence for the behaviour change? Evidence could be provided by primary consumer research/surveys, comparable cases, scientific studies, third party consumer surveys, or assumption, for instance. You can continue to the next question if this does not apply.

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle?)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.



**Principle 2: Relevance** (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 22-24)

**Talk about major improvements — in areas that matter**

- Highlight product characteristics or innovations that really make a difference to the overall sustainability performance of the product
- Make sure that the subject of the claim is in an area that is integral to the product, i.e. its function, materials or performance
- Check legal requirements before making a claim, so that your product is significantly better than what is already required by law.

a) Is the subject of your claim a major driver of the sustainability performance of the product? *(You can ensure that if having previously defined hotpots - or relevant aspects - of the product by undertaking Life Cycle Assessments or footprinting studies. See also the Mindset section)*

b) Are there any other important sustainability aspects on which the product is/ might be performing

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| poorly? If yes, is this made explicit in the claim (see also principle 3: clarity)?  |  |
| c) Does the product performance, on which the claim is based, exceed regulatory requirements of the production countries and (where required) also of the consumption countries? |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle?)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.



**Principle 3: Clarity** (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 25-29)

**Make the information useful for the consumer**

- Avoid vague, ambiguous and broad “general environmental/social benefit” claims
- Share information that helps consumers understand their role in improving product performance and the impact of their consumption
- Provide simple guidance on how consumers can alter or improve their consumption behaviour

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

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| a) The connection between the claim and the product is clear enough so consumers cannot think that the claim is also valid for similar/all products from the same brand. |  |
| b) The limits of the claim are clearly stated.   |  |

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| <p>c) All visual methods of communication (e.g. symbols, pictograms) are clear and unambiguous.</p>  |  |
| <p>d) Information is clear and concise.</p>  |  |
| <p>e) Plain, non-technical language is used for text-based information so consumers can easily understand it.</p> <p>f) Imagery is used in a way that is not likely to be misinterpreted.</p> <p>g) The limits of the claim are clear and therefore the claim is not exaggerated.</p>                        |  |
| <p>h) Are additional details available elsewhere (e.g. online) to support a better understanding of the claim (more detailed, technical information can be made available here for those that seek it; see also Principle 5: Accessibility)?</p> <p>If YES, give more information e.g. website addresses</p> |  |
| <p>i) For quantitative information: Is context or a reference system provided, so consumers can better understand the impact of their consumption (e.g. understand higher and lower carbon footprints)?</p> <p>If YES, give more information</p>   |  |
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In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.



**Principle 4: Transparency** (Please refer to  
pages 30-31)

*the Guidelines*

**Satisfy the consumer’s appetite for information, and do not hide**

- Allow consumers to evaluate the information that underpins the claim
- Provide comprehensible information
- Adapt the information supply to the consumer’s interest and product-related needs: from general, easy-to-understand to detailed and complex where appropriate
- Do not make a claim when the underlying information is considered confidential

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| <p>a) Can the consumer trace the information/data behind the claim, and how it was generated (e.g. through a scientific study, multi-stakeholder process, company, etc.)? If yes, how? (Are selected methods, data sources, assumptions, etc. available or published?)</p> |  |
| <p>b) Is a list of the bodies/stakeholders involved in the claim development process available?</p>  |  |
| <p>c) Can the underlying information (data behind the claim) be made available to the public and/or at least to a competent body (in the case of information that is considered confidential)?</p>   |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.



**Principle 5: Accessibility** (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 32-34)

**Let the information get to the consumer, not the other way around**

- Make the claim clearly visible for consumers (e.g. front of pack, appropriate font size, graphics/logo)
- Provide the information when and where the consumer needs it
- Avoid any barriers (e.g. technical) and use several communication methods, so that different information seeking habits are respected and satisfied
- Tackle constraints like limited space with direct links to online resources

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| <p>a) Is the claim readily accessible at the time and location the consumer needs it, e.g. during research into buying options, the point of purchase or use (as relevant)?</p> <p>b) Is the claim as close to the product as possible and accessible without the help of external devices (e.g. scanners, websites; though these may help later)?</p> |  |
| <p>Are you aware of any barriers (intended or unintended) that impair access to the information (e.g. small font size, technical language or data)?</p> <p><b>IF YES: What are they and how are you planning to reduce the barriers?</b></p>   |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

## **4. ASPIRATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

The following five principles go **beyond** the fundamental principles for you to continuously improve the ways in which you communicate to consumers. They are **not compulsory, but you are encouraged** to meet them over time.

*Principle 6: Three Dimensions of Sustainability (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 36-39)*

**Show the complete picture of product sustainability**

- Inform the consumer of the improved performance of your product in all three sustainability dimensions (environmental, economic and social) and make sure all relevant aspects of sustainability are considered
- Make your sustainability claim tangible and specify how your product performs better in all sustainability dimensions

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| <p>a) Do you communicate more than one sustainability dimension in your claim or combine complementary claims on more than one dimension (e.g. on environmental and social performance), or do you plan to do so in the future?</p> |  |
| <p>b) If you communicate overall sustainability of your product, do you address hotspots in all three sustainability dimensions, so that burden shifting is avoided?</p>  |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

*Principle 7: Behaviour Change and Longer Term Impact (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 40-42)*

**From information to action**

- Encourage consumers to act during the purchase, re/use and disposal phase of

products in order to reduce adverse effects on the environment and society

- Implement engagement processes that secure longer-term relationships with consumers to better understand their behaviour and information needs – for your own improvement and to develop educational content for sustainability, based around their lives and society
- Embed the sustainability information into a wider context and support the sustainability knowledge of consumers

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| <p>a) Were consumer interests (e.g. which issues consumers care about regarding this product/ sector) identified beforehand?</p>   |  |
| <p>b) Are behaviour changes of consumers monitored?<br/> <b>IF YES: Are they communicated? Do consumers receive feedback on the positive impact that results from their changed behaviour (e.g. statistics on emissions reductions because of using the product in a certain way)?</b></p> |  |
| <p>c) Is the environmental or social impact that arises from consumer's behaviour changes monitored?</p> <p>d) Do you try to build a longer-term relationship with the consumer for change of behaviour to be sustained and not only be adopted short-term or for a one-time decision?</p> |  |
| <p>e) Do you embed your product sustainability information into a wider context? For example, actively encouraging consumers to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns in general?<br/> <b>IF YES: How is it done?</b></p>  |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

*Principle 8: Multi-Channel and Innovative Approach (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 43-44)*

**Engage with consumers in diverse ways**

- Address consumers where they need the information
- Creatively remind and inspire consumers how they can act more sustainably – don't bore them
- Use a combination of different communication approaches

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| <p>a) Do you use different communication channels/ touch points to address different consumers/ user groups?<br/>Which communication channels you employ and/or plan to employ in the future?</p> |  |
| <p>b) Do consumers have the possibility to interact (with each other or you)?<br/>If yes, How?</p>  |  |
| <p>c) Is the consumer also addressed in a humorous or entertaining way rather than just being informed?<br/><b>If YES: How?</b><br/><b>If Not Yet, how do you plan to do so?</b></p>              |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle?)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

*Principle 9: Collaboration (Please refer to the 45-46)*

*Guidelines pages*

**Work with others to increase acceptance and credibility**

- Involve a wider group of actors (e.g. value chain partners, trade association members, NGOs) to jointly develop the basis for your sustainability claims
- Let other stakeholders participate and thereby improve the overall public acceptance and trust of your claims by consumers
- Inspire behaviour change through an inclusive language: let the consumer feel s/he is not alone but part of a (large) group or movement

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| <p>a) Have you considered existing voluntary sustainability standards (use for example ITC’s Standards Map to review criteria and potential application to your needs)?<br/><i>IF YES: Which one(s)?</i></p>         |  |
| <p>b) Did you involve relevant stakeholders (partners) in gathering evidence and developing your claim?<br/><i>IF YES: Does this include experts in the field, government representatives and/or consumers?)</i></p> |  |
| <p>d) Do you employ joint communication channels with partners (e.g. to help build trust, consistency and understanding of your claim)?</p>  |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

*Principle 10: Comparability (Please refer to the Guidelines pages 47-48)*

**Help consumers choose between similar products**

- Use product comparisons only where it really helps the consumer to make

sustainable choices

- Make sure that product comparisons are based on very strict and objective rules relevant to the specific product, such as product category rules
- Participate in relevant government-led or third party initiatives, or industry/sector collaborative approaches, to develop constructive comparability

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| <p><b>To compare similar products based on their sustainability performance and communicate this to consumers is a complex issue and not necessarily feasible for all product categories. If this practice is not applied to your claim, please continue to Section 5.</b></p> <p>a) Do you make a comparison claim?</p> <p>IF YES: How is it done, and how do you think product comparison in your case helps consumers to make a more sustainable choice.</p> |  |
| <p>b) Are there government or third-party led initiatives in which you could/ already do participate and on which you can base your product comparison?</p> <p>IF YES, Which ones?</p>  |  |
| <p>c) Does the selected methodology underlying your comparative claim explicitly cover guidance to product comparisons?</p> <p>IF YES: Are those guidance principles entirely fulfilled and backed up by a review of a third party (e.g. a critical review)?</p> <p>Which methodology do you use (optional)?</p>  |  |
| <p>d) If you opt for product comparison, did you ensure that the entire life cycle of the product is considered, so that important stages such as product use and disposal are not omitted?</p> <p>IF YES: How did you do that?</p>   |  |

In general, how would you evaluate your claim against this principle (i.e. is it easy for your claim to meet the principle?)?

Scale of 1-5 with 1 being very hard and 5 being very easy.

Please justify, explaining how & why you think your claim has met this principle, or the most important challenges that you have recognized in meeting this principle.

## **5. COMMENTS, SUGGESTIONS AND FEEDBACK**

Your opinion is important to us. If you have any questions or want to be further involved in our work, please don't hesitate to contact us at [ciscp@un.org](mailto:ciscp@un.org). We would also be interested to hear your feedback around the following questions: *Did you find the principles feasible to apply? Which principles did you find easy to implement and which ones you think are difficult to implement? What are the biggest challenges you are facing when communicating about your products' sustainability performance? After completing this tool, what would you do different in the future when issuing claims to your consumers?*

We invite you to join our international community of good practice on product sustainability information by applying to become a partner of the One Planet network Consumer Information Programme. You can find more information on how to become a partner here: <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/consumer-information-scp/how-get-involved>

For any questions, please contact [ciscp@un.org](mailto:ciscp@un.org).