Task Force on Principles and Metrics for Innovation in Sustainable Agri-Food Systems

FAQ [January 2022]

The current pilot of the Principles ends on March 31, 2022. Guidance documents may undergo changes before that.

Key concepts

What do you mean by 'sustainable agri-food systems?

The principles depart from an agri-food system understanding; a perspective that covers the journey of food from farm to table – including when it is grown, fished, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, distributed, traded, bought, prepared, eaten and disposed of. It also encompasses non-food products that also constitute livelihoods and all of the people as well as the activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these food and agricultural products (incl. fisheries, marine products, forestry and primary forestry products). The Task Force herein focuses on pre-production and production activities, and their relation to other activities such as processing, retail and consumption. These activities should deliver on the following food system outcomes (i.e. sustainable agri-food system objectives): (a) provide food and nutrition security and (b) economic opportunities and livelihoods to food system actors, while (c) sustainably managing natural resources and (d) promoting social equity. These activities and outcomes are influenced by a wide variety of drivers of the system. These include environmental drivers (e.g. climate change), political drivers (e.g. geopolitics), economic drivers (e.g. level of subsidies), demographic drivers (e.g. age structure), and social drivers (e.g. gender issues). Each of these influence food system activities (positive or negative) and their ability to deliver on the wanted outcomes.

What do you mean by 'innovation in sustainable agri-food systems'?

The Taskforce uses FAO's definition of agricultural innovation, stating that 'Agricultural innovation is the process whereby individuals or organizations bring new or existing products, processes or ways of organization into use for the first time in a specific context'. Within the agri-food system, innovation can be understood as the process and a set of measures or actions that change the intensity and/or direction of the technology, policy, services or institutional drivers that then lead to changes in design, production or recycling of goods and services and/or changes in the institutional environment.

What is the difference between innovation process principles and outcome principles? How do they relate to one another?

The principles should guide investors and innovators to consider and include sustainable agri-food system objectives in their investment/innovation decisions. They are focused on improving the innovation process in line with the intended outcomes. Following that, the 'innovation process principles' steer the innovation process more technically while the 'outcome principles' define the

scope of intended outcomes and in that way direct the impact of an innovation. Both work complementary.

Purpose and target group

What is the purpose of the principles for innovation?

The principles are intended to guide investors and innovators to consider and include sustainable agri-food system objectives in their investment/innovation decisions. Then again they provide a template to external actors for determining how thoroughly investors and innovators have considered said objectives in their planning (i.e. has this project considered biodiversity? If yes, how?). In that way, the principles are also a tool to facilitate accountability and benchmarking processes aiding improvement towards said objectives.

Who are the principles for innovation intended for?

The Task Force decided to target the following user groups for the Principles, with the potential to also make the metrics useful for farmers and farmers' groups:

- *Public and private direct investors (funders) in Innovation for sustainable Agri-Food Systems*
- *Managers and implementers of R4D and innovation programs, both public and private*
- *Certification, benchmarking and watchdog organizations*

Why do the principles not measure progress by creating a centralized framework for innovation outcomes?

The principles are not intended to directly help measure whether an innovation has successfully achieved sustainable agri-food system outcomes (e.g. increases in biodiversity or food security as a result of a project). The lack of causality known by all M&E experts make such an undertaking too difficult and resource-intensive considering that the principles should be accessible and widely applicable.

How does the scoring system relate to outcome metrics and measuring of outcomes?

The scoring system looks at the extent to which an innovation project or program or organization is addressing each of the principles. The score does not attempt to measure progress of the innovation against outcomes, because this measurement is not simple and will vary for different types of innovations (for example financial or technical), stage of innovation and type of organization. Instead, the score is intended to assess whether the project, program or organization is making a credible attempt to measure progress using appropriate methods and indicators.

Metrics (such as income, nutrition or carbon in the soil) cannot normally be used on their own to measure progress against innovation outcomes, due to the problem of causality (i.e. the observed change in the metric may not be wholly due to the innovation). However, metrics can be used in combination with other tools (such as evaluations and projected benefits) and the taskforce can

help share metrics appropriate for different uses. One example is the Sustainable Innovation Lab indicators (Musumba et al 2017) which are increasingly used for agricultural field research.

The scoring system

What is the relation between the principles and the scoring system? What am I scoring?

The scoring system can be used to assess each principle individually indicating what action has been taken by an innovator or an organization to implement it. The three different scores then show how thoroughly the investor or innovator has considered the principles in their planning. It is not a direct indication of the impacts of an innovation or organization.

0 - No evidence that action has been taken.
1 - Action taken and evidence gathered on implementation of the Principle.
2 - Evidence that information on the Principle has been regularly and systematically collected, analyzed and used, needed changes have been implemented.

Should I score the sub-principles?

The sub-principles are an overview of the basic elements included in a principle that should be considered in its application. While the relevance of each of them must be considered, they do not require individual scoring.

Operationalization

Where do I start?

Build on the existing reporting mechanisms for innovation processes (incl. research) within your organization (guidelines for innovation, planning and monitoring of innovation processes). Use the principles to identify gaps or weaknesses within these reporting mechanisms as well as in internal innovation processes more broadly. Plan on how you can improve internal processes in accordance with the principles. The principles are thought of as a complementary set of reporting standards in addition to what is already there. Evidence for reporting on any principle can thus be generated by already existing reporting mechanisms. This spreadsheet [to be added] provides an overview of how other actors have been monitoring the principles and their sub-principles.

At what organizational level should I apply the scoring system? Can the principles be applied to an innovation pipeline or an entire organization? How would scores be aggregated?

The scoring system can easily be applied to individual innovation processes but it may be more effective to apply them at the programme level which includes a number of innovations in order to assess if an innovator/organization overall moves in the direction that the principles describe. It is not yet finally discussed how scores can be aggregated from individual projects and innovations towards the programme level and if and how to apply weighting criteria in the aggregation. However, there will not be one overall score across principles as doing well in any particular principle can factually not make up for deficiencies in other areas.

Do I have to apply all the principles?

Yes! While each principle stands for itself and requires individual scoring, the principles constitute a complementary set of guidelines, the effectiveness of which suffers if one or more principles are left out. Principles that are less of a priority to a user are particularly relevant when it comes to trade-offs between the principles (Principle 4). Prioritization in terms of allocating more or less resources to the monitoring of particular principles is of course possible as long as each one is considered sufficiently. Principles with a lower score should not be neglected but point users to areas they can improve on.

Do I have to apply all principles simultaneously?

Generally, all principles must be considered adequately at every stage of the innovation process. Still, innovation process principles (1-4) and their sub-principles in particular may not need to be applied at the same time as they relate to specific stages of the innovation process; e.g. conceptualizing a clear and flexible route to intended impact is crucial in the conversion/product development phase but might not apply to the idea creation phase. In that sense, principles may need to be applied sequentially.

Throughout the innovation process, how regularly should I determine scores for the principles?

Ideally, the scoring should be done at each key stage of an innovation process, such as idea generation, conversion, testing/diffusion and/or scaling/adoption though this depends of course on the processes within each organization.

How do I address trade-offs between principles as well as unintended consequences in decision-making around agri-food system innovations?

Innovators can prioritize any outcome or set of outcomes but need to be aware of trade-offs and address these proactively. Application of a lower priority principle in an area where there is negative impact (e.g. depletion of water resources) typically means offsetting those negative effects through mitigation measures and thereby causing no harm. Adequate monitoring of lower priority principles is key for that while it also facilitates learning. Unintended consequences that emerge later in the process are to be dealt with in the same way. Trade-offs between process principles are theoretically also possible and sufficient consideration of each principle is the ultimate objective.

Other questions

Why do the principles not include the key issue of scaling innovations?

In the understanding of innovation, the principles build on the CCAFS/FCDO framework on scaling of innovation, which presents a route to achieving scale from the very start of the process. As such, the principles do not include the issue of scaling of innovations, but instead emphasize the

need to include an intended route to impact (i.e. theory of change) towards achieving impact at scale.

Why is there no principle on resilience?

Resilience of agri-food system outcomes points to the system's ability to maintain a certain level of performance despite shocks (short term) and stresses (long term). Alternatively, it can be understood as a property of the food system, meaning that the food system activities are robust against or can recover from shocks and stresses. As such, resilience is included in the system thinking principle. It further can only be achieved through the consideration of all other principles.

How do I make sure the right people are included in the innovation process and impacts on all stakeholders are considered (P3)?

Various principles ask innovation developers to apply an inclusive, and transparent process, to bring in the end users into the process, and to build on various forms of knowledge (e.g. local, scientific, indigenous). This can also include bringing in the wider political, cultural, and/or social agri-food system context within which a particular innovation is applied into the innovation process. This process is not easy or clear cut and can reveal and lead to power imbalances within the process and in its outcomes. Innovators should consider consultation with potential users and also those who may be affected, and openly publish on what and how groups have been consulted. The results of consultations should also be published as appropriate.