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Explainer: Evidensia's framework for understanding supply chain sustainability approaches

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Evidensia's mission is to put credible evidence at the heart of sustainability action. We do this by making the impact and effectiveness of supply chain sustainability initiatives easier to understand and apply.

This explainer introduces a framework that brings together these diverse initiatives into six "sustainability approaches"[1] that are used to advance and support sustainable practices in supply chains and their governance. These approaches span a wide range of strategies and are loosely organised by their scope of influence – from single-company or commodity supply chains to transnational governance frameworks that underpin many other approaches.

Understanding this new framework is important for Evidensia users, as all resources held in the Evidensia library are associated with one of the six approaches outlined below:

1. Multilateral development frameworks
2. Sustainability-related laws and regulations
3. Jurisdictional and multi-stakeholder initiatives
4. Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS)
5. Corporate sourcing and investment practices
6. Benchmarking, reporting and disclosure frameworks

It is important to note that these approaches are **not mutually exclusive.** For example, there is increasing overlap between Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Jurisdictional and Multi-stakeholder approach initiatives as traditional VSS expand into jurisdictional certification.

Each approach in the framework includes a range of specific "tools" used to put the approach into practice and which can be studied to give measurable outcomes. Examples of these tools are provided in the framework explainer below.

This framework reflects the major types of sustainability approaches that have been in use for a long period of time. Other organisations may categorise different initiatives into other approaches and the Evidensia framework will continue to evolve as the field develops.

How to navigate Evidensia's evidence library using these approaches

Users can explore these approaches and their associated tools using the '**approach' and 'tools' filters** in the Evidensia library. All interactive features on the platform can also be filtered by approach type and individual tools of interest.

[1] Evidensia previously organised the tools and resources under 11 sustainability approaches. See the annex for details of how the framework has changed.

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Understanding the Evidensia supply chain approaches in detail

1. Multilateral development frameworks

- This approach includes voluntary frameworks, guidelines, or "soft law" agreements developed through multilateral cooperation involving governments, private sector, and civil society.
- They provide a high-level, normative basis for sustainable practices in supply chains, harmonising expectations and setting common standards across borders.
- Although not legally binding, they guide and influence policy development, voluntary standards setting, and corporate practices by aligning stakeholders with global sustainability goals.

Scope of influence:
Broad; typically international or regional in scope; voluntary but strongly supported, ratified or endorsed by governments or international bodies. These normative frameworks set overarching principles and guidelines that shape and underpin other sustainability approaches.

Example tools:

- International Labour Organization's Forced Labour indicators
- UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct

2. Sustainability-related laws and regulations

- Certain legislations and regulations compel companies and other actors to meet sustainability requirements, aiming to prevent harmful environmental and social impacts within commodity production and trade.
- Given their broad reach, the requirements are often setting a floor for practice. This regulatory foundation often underpins and influences voluntary initiatives and corporate policies.
- Many also include mandatory reporting and transparency requirements, linking closely to performance benchmarking, reporting and disclosure frameworks (Approach 6).

- Some broad categories within this approach include:

- Binding international treaties
- National or regional laws and regulations
- Commodity-specific bans and moratoria
- Mandatory due diligence requirements, such as the European Union Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR)
- Import restrictions and export requirements
- Trade mandates

Scope of influence:
Mandatory and enforced by regional or national competent authorities and enforcement agencies; ranging from international treaties and regional agreements to national laws with direct impacts on global supply chains. These legal frameworks can impose obligations across borders and sectors.

Example tools:

- United Kingdom's Modern Slavery Act 2015
- European Union Timber Regulation 2013
- Dodd Frank Act 2010

3. Jurisdictional and multi-stakeholder initiatives

- This category includes government-led or multi-stakeholder efforts to **voluntarily** advance sustainability within a defined area.
- These approaches aim to align public policies, private sector actions, and community engagement around shared sustainability goals.

- Some broad categories within this approach include:
  - jurisdictional approaches that align sustainability actions within administrative units;
  - landscape approaches that manage sustainability issues collaboratively across geographic areas
  - multi-party agreements negotiated among public, private, and civil society actors;
  - national plans, platforms, strategies, or policies aimed at promoting sustainable sourcing, land use, or development.

Scope of influence:
Geographically or jurisdictionally defined and variable in scale; typically covering local, national, or regional levels. These initiatives may span landscapes or transboundary areas and are often linked to specific ecosystems or commodity-producing regions. All are led or supported by governments or involve collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Though tied to specific locations, they often have far-reaching influence through supply chain policies, trade relationships, or cross-border coordination.

Example tools:

- Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) Verified Sourcing Areas
- Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+)
- Colombia D-free palm oil pledge and program

4. Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS)

- These standards and their associated tools set expectations for environmental, social, and economic performance and have an element of verification though this can be 1st, 2nd, or 3rd party.
- Participation is generally voluntary but can be incentivised by market demand, corporate sourcing policies, or regulatory frameworks.
- They often complement or build on regulatory requirements (Approach 2) and can contribute to improving sustainability at scale through widespread adoption.
- Many of these initiatives are supported by underpinning system elements such as traceability systems, impact monitoring platforms, and capacity-building programmes that facilitate implementation and verification.

- Some broad categories within this approach include:
  - "Private" sustainability standards, their principles and criteria, certification schemes, and consumer-facing labels e.g. Rainforest Alliance;
  - Public or quasi-public sustainability standards and their respective system elements

- There is increasing overlap between approach types 3 and 4 as traditional VSS begin to expand into jurisdictional certification.

Scope of influence:

Voluntary and standard-setting with an element of verification; typically operating internationally, regionally or nationally and establishing formal sustainability criteria that vary widely across environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Often governed by multi-stakeholder bodies, they are widely adopted across supply chains by producers, traders and buyers who seek to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.

Example tools:

- Rainforest Alliance Certification
- Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI)
- Voluntary Carbon Standard (VCS)

5. Corporate sourcing and investment practices

- These efforts aim to improve environmental and social outcomes by setting standards, making targeted investments, and engaging suppliers.

- They differ from the other approach types in that they are "owned" and administered by the companies themselves. However, they can overlap with other approaches like VSS and jurisdictional approaches as they leverage private sector influence to advance sustainable commodity production and trade in various forums.

- Some broad categories within this approach include:
  - Sourcing policies or supplier engagement protocols
  - Supply chain investment programmes and the promotion of sustainable practice
  - Buyer-led sustainability pledges and commitments such as Zero-deforestation commitments

Scope of influence:

Voluntary and company-led; typically focused on individual companies' supply chains. These initiatives reflect private sector efforts to integrate sustainability into sourcing and investment decisions.

Example tools:

- Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality Program
- Nestlé Responsible Sourcing Core Requirements
- Unilever Sustainable Agriculture Code

6. Benchmarking, reporting and disclosure frameworks

- This category includes tools, frameworks and platforms that assess and communicate collective environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance.
- They take various forms, including disclosure standards, scorecards, rankings, dashboards and other data-driven mechanisms.
- They enable comparison across actors, regions, or timeframes to report progress, identify gaps, or evaluate performance.
- They can complement other sustainability approaches by providing a basis for tracking commitments, certification outcomes or alignment with best practice. However, they tend towards being more broad-brush and trends-based in their analysis.

Scope of influence:

Broad and cross-cutting; typically applies across sectors, geographies and supply chains. These initiatives are used by companies, investors, civil society organisations and regulators to assess, compare and communicate sustainability performance.

Example tools:

- Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) disclosures
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Palm Oil Buyers Scorecard
- Global Canopy's Forest 500 rankings

- World Benchmarking Alliance benchmarks

A note on the sustainability approaches and relevant evidence types

Evidensia also categorises evidence according to an evidence typology (see here).

One of the blocs that is most sought after in decision-making scenarios is empirical studies and syntheses of these. While it is possible to have robust empirical evidence on tools under the majority of the approaches described above, multilateral development frameworks and performance benchmarking, reporting and disclosure frameworks tend to have broader or less direct impacts. As a result, in the Evidensia evidence library, there is typically more:

a) descriptive information about the tools under these approaches (e.g. a landmark report examining progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals) or
b) "state of the market"-style research from organisations that own the "tools" e.g. CDP's annual reports on company forest-related disclosures and aggregate performance

For queries or feedback, please contact us at **evidensia@isealalliance.org**

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Annex 1: Mapping of original and updated supply chain approaches

Evidensia previously organised supply chain sustainability approaches into **11 categories**. To reduce overlap and simplify understanding, these categories have since been **consolidated and refined into the 6 broader approaches above**.

The table below shows how the original categories have been mapped onto the updated framework. In some cases, several of the original approaches were combined into one of the new broader categories.

Original approaches	Updated approaches
• Specific global or regional implementation norms for responsible supply chains	• Multilateral development frameworks
• Bans, moratoria, and multi-party agreements (for specific commodities/areas)	• Sustainability-related laws and regulations
• Jurisdictional approaches • Specific national plans, policies and platforms • Sustainability requirements within trade or procurement policies • Public or quasi-public sustainability standards • Bans, moratoria, and multi-party agreements (for specific commodities/areas)	• Jurisdictional and multi-stakeholder initiatives
• Voluntary Sustainability Standards • Supplementary VSS tools • Public or quasi-public sustainability standards	• Voluntary sustainability standards (VSS)
• Supply chain investment programs • Sustainable sourcing codes	• Corporate sourcing and investment practices
• Sustainability performance and progress reporting	• Performance benchmarking and disclosure