

Conclusions from the life cycle expert meeting.
**How to enhance communication of environmental product information between
retailers and their suppliers as well as their consumers?**

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Highlighting business opportunities and the role of retailers.

The participants recognized the great potential for sustainability actions in the retail sector. The sector is currently the stage of fast-paced evolutions, with a growing momentum towards sustainability engagement. There are also increasing society requirements and especially an increasing demand from consumers for more information on retail products (whether at environmental, social, or health level).

Some retailers have already taken the lead by developing sustainability activities, not only as a bottom-line improvement, but also to anticipate and orient future requirements. These actions aim at achieving more efficiency along the supply chain (for instance, driving waste out of the supply chain), and increasing consumer satisfaction by promoting sustainable consumption and production.

Retailers can play a central role in influencing consumer behaviour and lifestyle, through education and promotion, communication on sustainable product initiatives, but also by understanding the supply chain and the product's life cycle phases (namely impact during the use phase, as well as end-of-life and take-back implications). This engagement is a win-win situation for consumers, businesses, and also for the environment.

Using a life cycle approach.

The sector needs a comprehensive strategy towards sustainability, which can be provided by a life cycle approach. To improve and facilitate communication of product life cycle information to consumers, an infrastructure involving both retailers and suppliers should be developed. The transmission of information must be optimized to avoid technical and financial difficulties for suppliers and retailers. This would also facilitate verification and auditing.

The information to be used for communication has to be simple, transparent and accurate, to avoid further confusion for the consumer (that already has to understand different "green" labels and other product information).

Choosing an area of focus and relevant criteria.

To present the relevant information to consumers, it is important to adapt it to the actual demand and concerns (e.g. health issues, pesticides, organic products...) to use the existing opportunities. As it is difficult, at the current stage, to have a complete environmental or social assessment for all products, it would be best to focus on general principles and criteria. This allows to expand the focus beyond carbon impacts (that have been frequently addressed) and to consider the entire life cycle of a product.

To communicate the environmental life cycle information therefore implies classifying relevant product groups and relevant impacts. By identifying hotspots in the product's life cycle (e.g. use phase energy consumption), specific impacts could be addressed first and be the focus of communication activities. This communication process should involve those that have the most influence on consumers (e.g. sales and marketing management).

The working group can choose an area of focus in the food and drink area, the textile area, and/ or the ICT area. Retailers and suppliers could then agree on a common view of the information to be communicated, in a common set of criteria. Harmonize the sharing of information between suppliers and retailers would avoid the proliferation of formats for communication of information.

What we can the Life Cycle Initiative bring to the table?

The Life Cycle Initiative, with the core group of experts, can build awareness on what are life cycle approaches and how they can be used in the retail sector. This presentation and guidance will highlight how a retailer will succeed in using this approach, by identifying advantages and appropriate tools.

Practical examples and achievements over the last 20 years can be presented to illustrate how the life cycle approach can answer specific information. This has been verified in the dairy branch, for instance, or in other sectors (e.g. construction, waste management) that have already reaped the benefits from this approach.

Information can also be provided on how to communicate life cycle information (i.e. information evidenced by a Life Cycle Assessment) according to the audience and the objective of the action. The Life Cycle Initiative is a platform for discussion. It functions as a one-stop-shop for businesses, providing information of how to use life cycle methodologies and tools according to specific objectives. It can smooth the progress of the discussion on principles and criteria, facilitate best case sharing, and provide information and training on life cycle approaches.

Retailers and suppliers can sell sustainability as an innovation, as a continuous improvement. This improves internal and external communication, the company's bottom-line, and consumer satisfaction. By influencing consumer behaviour with specific data communication, using LCA, the retail sector can play in leading role in promoting sustainable consumption and production.