Sustainable Performance Assessment (SPA)

Q&A

What is SPA?

SPA stands for Sustainability Performance Assessment. It is the blueprint of a set of indicators for chosen sustainability issues, aimed to indicate to farmers the impacts of their farming practices to help them improve their farm sustainability. Based on these Guidelines, software developers can build tools that use the specifications which SAI Platform Member companies have identified as key.

What is SAI Platform?

The Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform is a food industry organisation supporting the development of sustainable agriculture, involving stakeholders of the food chain. In April 2012, SAI Platform had over 40 Member Companies and Affiliate Members. See http://www.saiplatform.org

Why did SAI Platform start the SPA project?

We had described in detail the Principles and Practices (P&Ps) of sustainable agriculture, but we had not yet defined how to measure progress. We needed to define a set of indicators on all sustainability issues such as water, social issues, soil health or energy explaining how to calculate and how to measure performance and progress on these issues.

How is it different from other existing tools?

We knew that there had already been a lot of work done by various groups on sustainability indicators and tools to calculate them, and we did not want to reinvent the wheel. At the same time, we wished to provide our Member companies with useful advice on which indicators and tools best help farmers estimate their sustainability impacts, and measure progress over time.
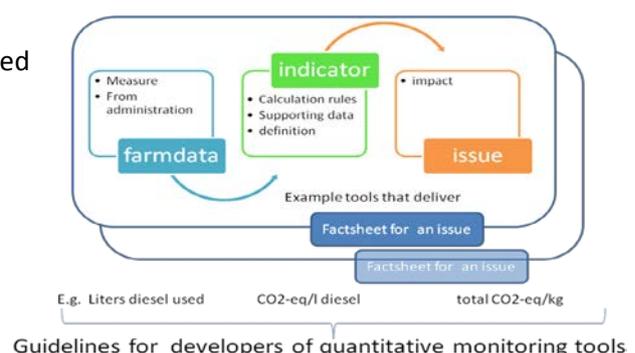
Thus, we agreed to look at all existing ones, and to identify those which are the most practical and useful. We gathered around 100 calculation tools from the US to Switzerland, from the Netherlands to Australia.

From this list we extracted a dozen specifically valuable, but still very different systems. Some are single issue tools and only calculate green house gas emissions or water and others provide a broader look on several issues. Some are very farmer friendly whereas others require assistance from eg, farm advisors. Finally, some are only regionally applicable, because they use regionally specific databases.

The third phase of SPA describes a set of indicators, and the way to calculate them from basic farm data to start to quantify continuous improvement in sustainable farming. Based on these guidelines, groups will be able to improve/adapt existing tools or develop new ones, in a way that leads to further alignment of sustainable farming.

How do you get from farm activities to a single number?

An indicator is a single figure, like 1 kg of CO_2-equivalents per liter of milk. What we have described with SPA is the link of this apparently abstract number, to concrete measurable farming activity, such as amount of fertiliser used, or liters of diesel used for a tractor. See the following graphic:

What does such a number tell us?

A single indicator does not indicate if it is good or bad. It becomes meaningful only when it is put in perspective:

When a farmer compares his/her score to his/her neighbours' score,

When a farmer compares his/her scores to what he/she achieved the previous year and the year before,

When a food company compares or consolidates average scores from one region of sourcing to another.

This is exactly the aim of SPA: to provide a uniform method for measuring farmers' performance, so that these performances become comparable.

How can SPA help farmers?

In our P&Ps we say –for example- that we want to reduce the impact on climate, and you can do it only if you know how your practices relate to climate impact. With the SPA we provide the farmer with a dashboard that tells him/her for every practice/action how it impacts the sustainability issues we are all concerned about, and how the impact will change by changing his practice/action.

How can SPA help food companies?

Only if food companies know how their suppliers perform, can they start consolidating and adding up numbers. Once they can do that, they can inform retailers or consumers of how their products perform More importantly, they know where they need to put their efforts to improve their sustainability performance.

So what exactly does SPA look like?

For each issue (climate, water use etc) SPA describes the following:

- what is the output indicator (e.g. kg CO_2-equivalent per kg of product);
- which data the farmer needs to put in (e.g. kg and type of fertilizer used);
- which background data is needed (e.g. standard emission factors, regional climate); and
- calculation rules (boundaries, formulae).

Each chapter or factsheet also briefly outlines why these data and methods were chosen.

What's next?

Version 1.0 of the report - including seven fact sheets - was published in early May 2012. These will be pilot tested in 2012-2013 and, based on the test findings, improved and revised. Version 2.0 of the report will be published in 2014.

Moreover, we are aware that we need to develop additional fact sheets for other issues. Social issues will be particularly difficult to measure.. If this concept works, meaning it is successfully pilot tested and adopted by software companies who build tools for farmers and users in the food value chain, we will add factsheets for more indicators in version 2.0.

There is an urgent need to agree simple indicators that provide direction, and therefore meaning, to the many words we use in sustainable agriculture and we would expect this to trigger innovation at field level rather than prescribing precisely what a farmer should do.

Further information

For more information about SPA, contact our secretariat: peywema@saiplatform.org or efellus@saiplatform.org.