



# Understanding Sustainability Initiatives

A TYPOLOGY FRAMEWORK





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# Foreword

Sustainability initiatives play an important role in a broader ecosystem of market-based and policy measures in supporting sustainable value chains. Developed over the last several decades by a wide range of stakeholders, sustainability initiatives today vary significantly in terms of their objective, scope, operations, and governance. Their diversity can generate confusion and uncertainty amongst users, also making it difficult to achieve effective synergies with the regulatory environment promoting sustainable value chains. Against this background, this joint ITC-OECD report presents a typology framework to promote a common language and a shared understanding of the complex landscape of sustainability initiatives with the aim to help policy makers, private sector operators, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders in facilitating and assessing sustainability performance, harmonising approaches, and integrating sustainability initiatives along value chains.

Conceived by the United Nations' International Trade Centre (ITC) in consultation with the ITC-led Trade for Sustainable Development (T4SD) Technical Working Group, the typology framework of sustainability initiatives has been jointly developed by the ITC, the Centre for Responsible Business Conduct of the OECD, and the Trade and Agriculture Directorate of the OECD. This joint work reflects engagement by ITC to support a better use of sustainability initiatives, including by small businesses. By supporting a more harmonised approach between public policies and sustainability initiatives, it also aims to contribute to the OECD policy objective to promote sustainable supply chains and responsible business conduct.

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# Executive Summary

This report presents a typology framework to increase a shared understanding of the complex landscape of sustainability initiatives.

A variety of multistakeholder, government-run, or industry-led initiatives have emerged over the past several decades. This phenomenon responds to different and evolving strategies by businesses, governments, and non-governmental organisations to evaluate and demonstrate the sustainable nature of economic activities along global value chains, as well as to recognise and incentivise good practices against specific standards. Sustainability initiatives are an important element in the governance ecosystem for sustainability, providing potentially effective tools and bottom-up approaches that are geared to specific goals. However, the resulting diversity and heterogeneity among sustainability initiatives can generate confusion and inefficiencies amongst users and prevent effective synergies with policy measures for more sustainable value chains.

The typology framework is designed to address these challenges by providing a structured system of parameters and a common language to increase awareness on how sustainability initiatives can differ. It takes into account the diversity and complexity of these initiatives and facilitates the assessment of their objectives, structure, and key principles. The framework is composed of four chapters: objective, scope, operations, and governance. Each chapter includes the key parameters, or differentiators, that define the main dimensions of the variations found in the sustainability initiatives. For each differentiator, the typology framework identifies a set of associated attributes, allowing to identify different types of sustainability initiatives with descriptive and value-neutral terms.

The common language and framework provided by this typology can be used as a basis for many applications by different users. These applications include capacity building platforms to increase knowledge and uptake of sustainability initiatives, as well as efforts by policy makers to reference and use sustainability initiatives as supporting or implementation tools in regulatory frameworks. However, while users can apply the typology framework to map specific initiatives against the differentiators of interest in empirical applications, the accuracy of any such exercise will depend on the assessment methodology employed and the resulting evidence base. Several best practices are outlined to address some of the challenges and risks with the empirical application of this typology.

Overall, by reducing confusion generated by fragmented and diverse assessments of sustainability initiatives, this typology framework can ultimately promote clarity and harmonisation, fostering a shared understanding of their structure and complexity. This, in turn, can help building more effective and consistent engagement with sustainability initiatives, including from the perspective of public policies looking for synergies and complementarities within a broader governance ecosystem for responsible business conduct.

# 1. Introducing the typology of sustainability initiatives

Businesses, governments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) use a variety of multistakeholder, government-run or industry-led initiatives to evaluate or demonstrate the sustainability performance of economic activities and outputs along global value chains (GVCs), as well as to encourage good practices according to specific standards. Many of these initiatives also support responsible business conduct by promoting collaborative efforts or by providing policies, guidance, and tools to assess and manage sustainability risks and impacts.

Since the first documented sustainability initiative in the late 1920s,<sup>1</sup> few were developed in the following decades and concerned primarily organic material. The first government-led programme was launched in 1979 by Germany (Blue Angel). This marked the beginning of a rapid increase in new initiatives and since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 the landscape of sustainability initiatives has become complex and fast changing. Today, sustainability initiatives are nearly as diverse as the combination of sustainability themes, products, and services they focus on and the stakeholders involved. They are often defined and understood differently by different actors. They also differ significantly in their quality, design, core activities, scope, governance systems, and levels of transparency. While this diversity reflects the broad range of purposes, users, and uses of sustainability initiatives, it also creates confusion and inefficiencies when navigating and differentiating between individual initiatives.

To better understand sustainability initiatives, researchers and practitioners have developed over the last few decades a research agenda across academic institutions, governmental agencies, international organisations (IOs), the private sector, and civil society. These efforts have generated a wide range of analytical tools and new data and initial empirical evidence that have all contributed to increased awareness on sustainability initiatives, including their mechanisms, impacts, and diffusion, as well as their limitations.

The ITC has a track record in collecting and harmonising data on a broad range of sustainability initiatives and other sustainability standards, publishing and maintaining the Standards Map Database (ITC<sub>[1]</sub>) in partnership with a large group of stakeholders. ITC data and reports have contributed to highlight the potential benefits and risks of sustainability standards (e.g. ITC (2021<sub>[2]</sub>)). In this area, the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS), a joint platform of FAO, ITC, UNCTAD, UN Environment and UNIDO, has been created to analyse sustainability initiatives that embed a standardisation component (UNFSS, 2013<sub>[3]</sub>). UNFSS has produced substantive output by looking at the linkages between sustainability standards, sustainable development, trade, and public policy. A major achievement of UNFSS is the establishment of an academic advisory council to create a network of experts and to promote academic research on sustainability initiatives (UNFSS<sub>[4]</sub>).

The assessment of the challenges and risks related to the development and diffusion of sustainability initiatives is an important area of research, highlighting potential weaknesses in the design and functioning of audit schemes and certifications, and the ability to drive positive impacts on the ground. In view of the



growing allegations of “green-washing” and “label-shopping”, this has led to important analytical and practical contributions to assess and benchmark sustainability initiatives. One example is the OECD’s ongoing alignment assessments of sustainability initiatives in the minerals, garment and footwear, and agriculture sectors, which have revealed important differences in the quality of audits and oversight mechanisms, as well as in how schemes implement international standards on responsible business conduct.<sup>2</sup> The ISEAL Sustainability Benchmarking Good Practice Guide defines how to analyse sustainability standards, certifications, corporate policies, and other sustainability initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

The vocabulary, definitions, and analytical tools nevertheless remain segmented and heterogeneous across different exercises (Box 1.1). The challenge to understand sustainability initiatives continues to be significant, but can be addressed in part via a common set of definitions and a comprehensive framework that differentiates between their core characteristics and allows to clearly identify different types of initiatives and to clarify their individual objectives, scope, and activities based on selected parameters.

### Box 1.1. Different definitions for different purposes

Sustainability initiatives encompass a wide range of sub-categories of sustainability schemes and programmes. These sub-categories often partially overlap. For this reason, sustainability initiatives tend to be identified through different definitions, which reflect different purposes and perspectives characterising the numerous communities of practitioners, researchers and policy makers who work on such initiatives.

The OECD, for example, has closely analysed the development of *environmental labelling and information schemes* (ELIS), defined as sustainability initiatives that aim to provide information about one or more aspects of the environmental performance of a product or service to external users. Examples include Gruère (2013<sup>[5]</sup>) for a characterisation of ELIS, Prag, Lyon and Russillo (2016<sup>[6]</sup>) on the challenges related to their multiplication, Klintman (2016<sup>[7]</sup>) on the linkages between ELIS and public policies, and Deconinck and Hobeika (2023<sup>[8]</sup>) on consumer-oriented schemes in the agri-food sector.

Another widely studied segment of sustainability initiatives, and partially overlapping with ELIS, is that of *voluntary sustainability standards* (VSS). UNFSS defines VSS as “standards specifying requirements that producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers or service providers may be asked to meet, relating to a wide range of sustainability metrics, including respect for basic human rights, worker health and safety, the environmental impacts of production, community relations, land use planning and others” (UNFSS, 2013<sup>[3]</sup>). The term VSS is often used to denote the sustainability initiatives that incorporate a sustainability standard. VSS are usually understood and researched as private actors, as illustrated in a review of key research themes on VSS by Marx, Depoorter and Vanhaecht (2022<sup>[9]</sup>). However, standards defined as required or the agreed level of quality or attainment can be also set by public entities (ITC, 2016<sup>[10]</sup>).

A further subset in the landscape of sustainability initiatives is defined by ISEAL and concerns *sustainability systems or schemes*. Sustainability systems or schemes are defined by ISEAL as the collective set of decisions and strategies carried out by an organisation or group of organisations to: (i) establish standards or similar tools focused on one or more sustainability issues; (ii) measure, monitor, or verify performance or progress against these tools; and (iii) allow for claims. A scheme can also undertake additional strategies that contribute to its sustainability outcomes and impacts, such as capacity-building or advocacy work (ISEAL, 2023<sup>[11]</sup>). This definition focuses mostly on market-based systems, which is why assurance and claims are inherently part of it.

The value of the typology lies in bringing a level of consistency and clarity about the characteristics of the broadest possible population of sustainability initiatives. For this purpose, the following definition of sustainability initiative is adopted.

*Any multistakeholder, government-run or industry-led scheme or programme that provides tools, information, guidance, framework, capacity building or otherwise facilitates, sets requirements and/or expectations for, and/or assesses an organisation's operations, products, services, suppliers and/or other business relationships in relation to sustainability objectives. For the purposes of this typology, "sustainability initiatives" do not include national legislation or international binding, non-binding, and regional legal instruments.*

Sustainability is generally defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987<sup>[12]</sup>). The notion of sustainability adopted by this typology framework does not depart from this definition.

Sustainability initiatives exist within a broader and fast-changing governance ecosystem where international or regional legal instruments, or national legislation on sustainability are being developed to define, evaluate, and promote more sustainable GVCs.<sup>4</sup> As stated in the above definition, these instruments and legislations are not covered by the notion of sustainability initiatives used in this report. International or regional legal instruments and national legislation differ from sustainability initiatives in terms of their legal nature and political weight. However, even though their approaches, definitions, and concepts often differ significantly, international or regional legal instruments, national legislation and sustainability initiatives all operate and interact within the same broad governance ecosystem and share the same goal of promoting inclusive and sustainable development of economic activities along the value chain.<sup>5</sup> In addition, legal and regulatory frameworks increasingly reference sustainability initiatives (UNFSS, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>; Bermúdez and Sarmiento, 2024<sup>[14]</sup>).

The challenges faced by governments, business actors, and civil society in their efforts to promote sustainability in GVCs could nevertheless benefit from a more comprehensive perspective that embraces and differentiates between international legal instruments, national legislation, and sustainability initiatives within a common typology framework. While the typology presented in this report has been designed to focus only on sustainability initiatives, it can be extended and adjusted in the future to propose a common language and a unified system to facilitate the assessment of potential synergies, complementarities and inter-operability between sustainability initiatives, international and regional legal instruments, and national legislation. Such an extended typology would create efficiencies and encourage collaboration, as well as identify and address risks within broader areas of this rich and diverse governance ecosystem. The effort to develop an extended typology lies beyond the scope of this report, however, and is left for future research.

## 1.1. Structure and underlying principles

The proposed typology consists of a comprehensive framework that identifies, names, and defines the key parameters of sustainability initiatives. These parameters are called *differentiators* as they help to differentiate the wide variety of sustainability initiatives through descriptive terms. Differentiators are the "building blocks" of the typology, recognising that sustainability initiatives may originate from different stakeholders, have different objectives, a different focus on sustainability themes, operate in different contexts, and have different systems of implementation.

The framework of the typology organises differentiators into thematic *chapters*, depending on whether a differentiator captures a feature of sustainability initiatives pertaining to their objective, scope, operation, or governance. Moreover, for each differentiator the typology proposes a set of associated *attributes*. Attributes are initially identified to allow for a high-level differentiation between sustainability initiatives. The typology is *flexible* enough to accommodate further levels of potential attributes, thereby introducing more

detailed differences among sustainability initiatives.<sup>6</sup> This flexible and hierarchical approach allows for different levels of granularity (from simple to complex) and responds to the practical needs of various users and uses. Box 1.2 summarises the content of these four chapters.

### **Box 1.2. The four chapters of the typology framework**

#### ***Objective chapter***

Focuses on the purpose of a sustainability initiative and on its overall approach to achieve sustainability. Differentiators and attributes in this chapter allow to distinguish amongst different types of facilitation and verification initiatives.

#### ***Scope chapter***

Includes dimensions of variability pertaining to coverage of the sustainability initiative, and who and what it applies to. Differentiators and attributes in this chapter allow to identify types of initiatives in terms of the targeted sector, geography, value chain segment, sustainability theme, subject, performance, and aspect of due diligence.

#### ***Operations chapter***

Addresses the practical aspects of implementing sustainability initiatives. Differentiators and attributes in this chapter allow to differentiate initiatives in terms of assurance systems, grievance mechanisms, chain of custody model, sustainability claims, and monitoring and evaluation systems, and approaches for recognising other initiatives.

#### ***Governance chapter***

Covers dimensions of governance. The differentiators and attributes allow to characterise types of initiatives based on their ownership, and approaches to stakeholder engagement and information disclosure.

The typology framework is itself intended to be *value-neutral*. In other words, the differentiators and their attributes reflect efforts to agree on a consistent terminology and language, and to provide a high-level framework to increase awareness of the key elements that make one initiative different from another. The typology framework is not designed to benchmark or generate a ranking of sustainability initiatives, nor to prioritise specific attributes or differentiators over others. It allows users to differentiate sustainability initiatives based on what is important to them and their purpose.

The structure and principles of the framework allow the typology to simplify and bring coherence to how different users and stakeholders understand and interact with the landscape of sustainability initiatives. Unlike the many tools which focus on evaluation and benchmarking, this typology offers a structured framework and a consistent terminology to increase and harmonise awareness of several key elements that differentiate sustainability initiatives, without prescribing or ranking them. It is also different from the system of variables in existing datasets covering sustainability initiatives, such as the UN ITC Standards Map<sup>7</sup> or the Ecolabel Index<sup>8</sup>, but complements these by focusing on high-level dimensions of variation in the broadest possible population of sustainability initiatives.

## 1.2. What are possible uses of the typology framework?

The core purpose of the typology is to offer a system and common language to characterise and differentiate sustainability initiatives at a high level. While it seeks to promote more consistent language and categorisation of the scope and key elements of the initiatives, it does not provide an assessment tool to evaluate the quality, rigour, or significance of sustainability initiatives.

With this caveat in mind, different user groups can apply the typology of sustainability initiatives for a range of purposes. For example, trade policy makers can use the typology to differentiate among sustainability initiatives when developing and assessing strategies to promote synergies between trade policies and sustainability initiatives. The typology could provide trade negotiators with a common language to refer to the types of initiatives that are relevant for them, or to make recommendations in terms of specific differentiators and attributes.

More generally, the typology can be used by other public sector actors seeking a common language and framework as a basis for developing consistent strategies to evaluate, use, and reference sustainability initiatives in regulatory frameworks or other policy measures (e.g. public procurement, investment agreements or development cooperation). Similarly, the common language and framework provided by the typology can be used as a basis for other applications by different users, including the following.

- Private and/or public organisations developing and/or implementing:
  - sustainability initiatives (e.g. [GIZ's implementation of the Green Button](#) certification mechanism for textiles)
  - comparisons and benchmarking of sustainability initiatives (e.g. Germany's Standards Compass, the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF) [SSCI Benchmark](#), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) [Certification Assessment Tool](#), IISD [State of Sustainability Initiatives](#) reports)
  - assessments of sustainability initiatives against international sustainability standards and/or legislative frameworks (e.g. OECD, EU).
- Capacity-building platforms in developing countries working to increase knowledge and uptake of sustainability initiatives (e.g. UNFSS National Platforms).
- Research, academia, IOs, NGOs involved in the field of sustainability and/or evaluating initiatives against a set of criteria (e.g. ISEAL, IISD).
- Private sector actors in search of sustainability initiatives relevant to their business (e.g. Nestlé, Unilever, Cargill).
- Public sector actors seeking to evaluate, use and reference sustainability initiatives in regulatory frameworks or other policy measures (e.g. investment or trade agreements or development co-operation).

Overall, a common language across different users and stakeholders can enhance interoperability and promote synergies between different initiatives. The typology can also improve accessibility in navigating the different tools and approaches of sustainability initiatives, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through a common, simplified building block approach designed to better understand how one sustainability initiative differs from another.

### 1.3. Empirical applications of the typology: Challenges and best practices

Any empirical application of the typology will involve subjective determinations by different users about which attributes “fit” or apply to which initiatives, depending on the evidence base and assessment methodology used. Users can apply the typology framework to map specific initiatives against the differentiators of interest. However, the credibility of any such exercise will depend on the user’s evidence base (e.g. whether data are based on self-reporting by initiatives, desk-top review, or more investigative on-site assessments to understand how initiatives operate in practice), and assessment methodology (e.g. whether these data are validated or independently verified in a transparent manner), and how well it communicates on both aspects to the public.

Conducting empirical applications with low quality or unvalidated data, and weak or non-transparent assessment methods poses significant risks. These include the potential for unreliable or biased results, misguided decisions, all of which lead to a loss of credibility. For example, inconsistent or flawed data can lead different stakeholders to contradictory assessments of a sustainability initiative, causing confusion, lack of trust, and even conflict.

Several best practices should be considered when applying the typology. First, using properly verified data and information rather than relying solely on self-assessments by the initiatives themselves can lead to greater accuracy and credibility. Involving multiple stakeholders in the data construction process is also helpful as it brings diverse perspectives and reduces biases. Additionally, regular updates and reviews of the data and categorisation criteria should be conducted to keep the typology relevant and reflective of current sustainability challenges and advancements. Finally, clear documentation and transparency in how data is collected, assessed, and categorised will further enhance the reliability of the application and to build trust amongst users.

The UN ITC Standards Map, the largest available database covering sustainability initiatives, can potentially serve as a valuable resource for empirical applications of the typology presented here.<sup>9</sup> For this purpose, the structure and variables of the ITC Standards Map database can be aligned with the typology framework during future revisions and updates of the database. The integration of this typology into the ITC Standards Map database will significantly enhance its functionality. The typology will provide a high-level, structured framework to categorise and analyse sustainability initiatives based on the data collected by the ITC. Furthermore, the flexibility of the typology will allow the Standards Map database to remain current as sustainability challenges and priorities evolve, offering users up-to-date information and insights. This enhancement will make the Standards Map a more powerful tool for stakeholders to navigate and engage with sustainability standards effectively.

## 2. Introducing the typology framework

The typology framework is composed of four chapters: objective, scope, operations, and governance that are the main foundational elements of a sustainability initiative. Each chapter is broken down into differentiators, which are building blocks based on value neutral characteristics that can provide comprehensive assessments of the broad landscape of sustainability initiatives as well as facilitate differentiation between groupings of initiatives. The typology currently consists of 18 differentiators. For each differentiator, potential attributes are introduced and defined.

Two practical principles concerning the typology framework are important to bear in mind.

- Although the typology is designed as a comprehensive framework, it necessarily comes with simplifications. In particular, there may be various interlinkages and interdependencies across chapters, differentiators, and attributes which the typology does not explicitly account for.
- Potential attributes of a differentiator are not necessarily exclusive. For instance, the facilitation objective of a sustainability initiative could consist in providing at once guidance, tools, and capacity building, even though these are all captured by distinct attributes in the typology.

Figure 2.1 on the following page provides a graphical representation of the typology framework. The remainder of Section 2 lists and defines all chapters, differentiators, and attributes.

### 2.1. Objective

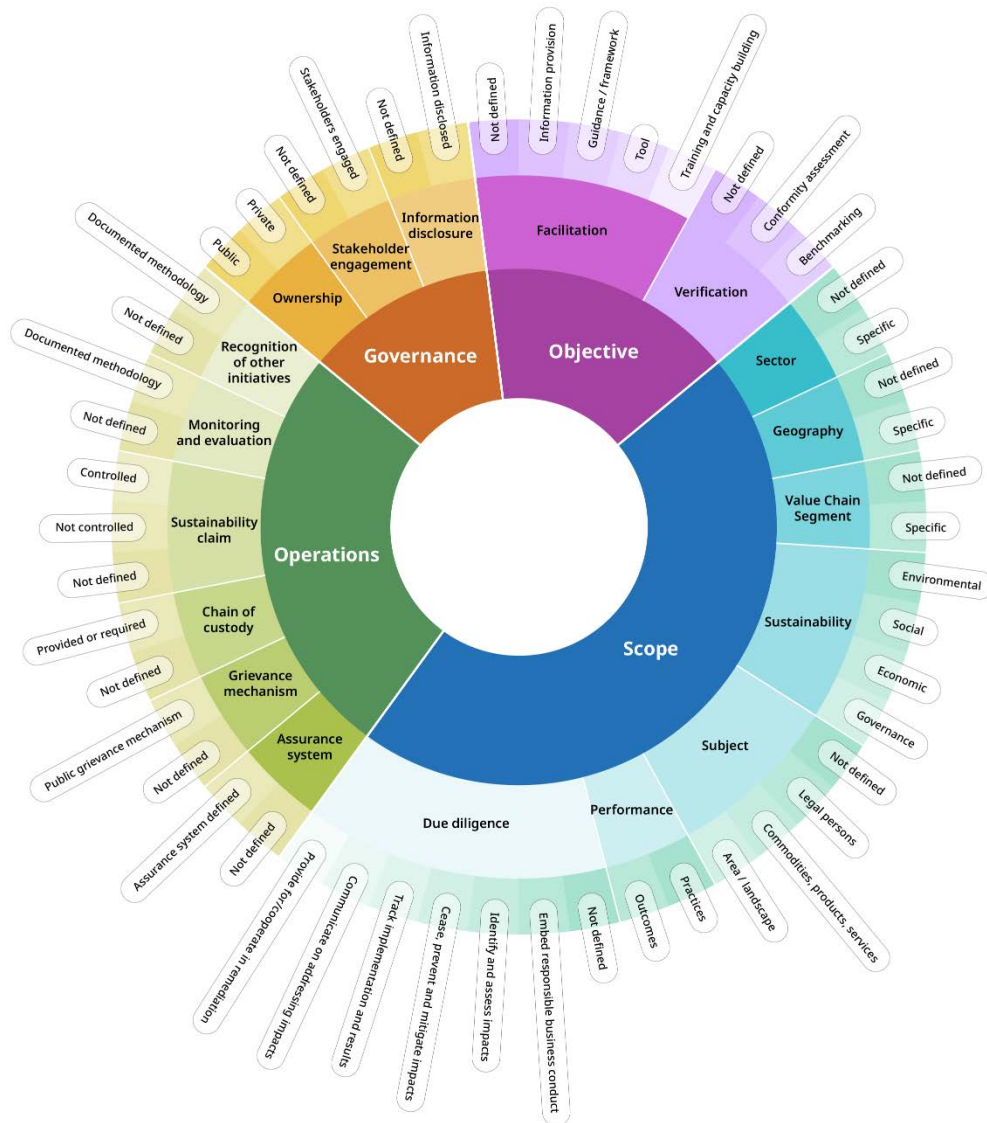
The “objective” chapter of the framework includes differentiators pertaining to the purpose of a sustainability initiative and to its overall approach to achieving sustainability. The differentiators distinguish between two possible uses for the sustainability initiatives: “facilitation” and “verification”. Table 2.1 lists the differentiators and potential attributes of this chapter.

**Table 2.1. Objective chapter of the typology framework**

Differentiators	Potential attributes
Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Information provision</li> <li>• Guidance / framework</li> <li>• Tool</li> <li>• Training and capacity building</li> </ul>
Verification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Conformity assessment</li> <li>• Benchmarking</li> </ul>



Figure 2.1. Typology framework



Note: This figure provides a graphic representation of the typology framework through concentric rings. The ring in the middle displays the differentiators, which are organised across the four chapters displayed in the internal ring. First-level potential attributes associated to each differentiator are plotted over the external ring.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

### 2.1.1. Facilitation

This differentiator captures whether the objective of the sustainability initiative consists in providing information, tools, guidance or support to facilitate the targeted sustainability performance (see differentiator performance under Section 2.2.6) of a subject (see differentiator subject under Section 2.2.5).

#### Potential attributes

- *Not defined.* The objective of the sustainability initiative does not consist in providing information, tools, guidance, or support to facilitate the sustainability performance of a subject's activity.

- *Information provision.* The sustainability initiative provides information such as geographic information, sector-, product- or site-specific information, such as product or life cycle assessment data, information on joint buyers or suppliers, and chain of custody or other traceability information.
- *Guidance, targets, and metrics.* The sustainability initiative provides guidance (e.g. on chemical management best practices, establishing grievance mechanisms, improving purchasing practices or supplier assessments), and sets sustainability targets or metrics.
- *Tools.* The sustainability initiative provides standardised tools such as risk assessment tools, reporting tools, and other templates.
- *Training and capacity building.* The sustainability initiative carries out training and capacity building of participating enterprises, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

### 2.1.2. Verification

This differentiator captures whether the sustainability initiative sets written sustainability expectations or requirements for the targeted sustainability performance (see differentiator performance under Section 2.2.6) of a subject (see differentiator subject under Section 2.2.5) and monitors, benchmarks, or otherwise assesses enterprises, sites, products, services, or claims against those standards and requirements. Monitoring and assessment activities vary significantly in quality and frequency, considerations which are intentionally not captured in this differentiator and related attributes.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined.* The initiative does not have a verification objective.
- *Conformity assessment.* The sustainability initiative has a defined process for evaluating, measuring, and/or attesting whether materials, products, processes, services, management systems, sites, and enterprises align with expectations or meet requirements which are defined by the sustainability initiative.
- *Benchmarking.* The sustainability initiative has a structured and systematic way of carrying out evaluations against benchmarks. Benchmarking is any standard or reference by which others can be measured and provides users with comparable information about the benchmarked entities. Examples include global benchmarks that score and rank companies' sustainability performance or benchmarks that recognise certification programmes that meet specific thresholds or performance criteria.

## 2.2. Scope

This chapter includes differentiators on the coverage of the sustainability initiative, and who and what it applies to. Table 2.2 reports the differentiators and potential attributes of the “scope” chapter.

**Table 2.2. Scope chapter of the typology framework**

Differentiators	Potential attributes
Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Specific</li> </ul>
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Specific</li> </ul>
Value chain segment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non defined</li> <li>• Specific</li> </ul>
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental</li> <li>• Social</li> </ul>



Differentiators	Potential attributes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic</li> <li>• Governance</li> </ul>
Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal persons</li> <li>• Commodities, products, services</li> <li>• Area / landscape</li> </ul>
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practices</li> <li>• Outcomes</li> </ul>
Due diligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Embed responsible business conduct</li> <li>• Identify and assess impacts</li> <li>• Cease, prevent and mitigate impacts</li> <li>• Track implementation and results</li> <li>• Communicate on addressing impacts</li> <li>• Provide for / co-operate in remediation</li> </ul>

### 2.2.1. Sectoral scope

This differentiator captures whether the scope of the sustainability initiative applies to all sectors or is specific to one or a combination of sectors.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined sectors.* The sustainability initiative is not specific to any sector.
- *Specific to one or a combination of sectors.* The sustainability initiative applies to one or a combination of sectors. As more granular second level potential attributes, sectors from any sectoral classification could be used.

### 2.2.2. Geography scope

This differentiator captures whether the scope of the sustainability initiative applies to all geographies or is specific to one or a combination of geographies.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined geographies.* The sustainability initiative is not specific to any geographies.
- *Specific to one or a combination of geographies.* The sustainability initiative applies to one or a combination of geographies. As more granular second level potential attributes, regions, or countries from any list of regions/countries could be used.

### 2.2.3. Value chain segment scope

This differentiator captures the segment of the value chain covered by the initiative's activities and/or requirements.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined value chain segment.* The sustainability initiative could apply to any segment of the value chain.
- *Specific to one or a combination of value chain segments.* The sustainability initiative applies to specific segments of the value chain. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list of value chain segments could be used:

- Primary production
- Processing and manufacturing
- Trading
- Retailing and consumption
- Transport and logistics
- End of life and recycling

#### **2.2.4. Sustainability scope**

This differentiator captures whether the sustainability initiative covers environmental, social, and economic aspects or governance-related issues in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

##### *Potential attributes*

- **Environment.** Covers dimensions of sustainability that address environmental impacts or objectives. These include (among others): climate change mitigation and adaptation; the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of biological diversity; the sustainable, efficient and lawful use of land, resources and energy; sustainable consumption and production, including through promotion of circular economy approaches; and pollution prevention, reduction and control.
- **Social.** Covers dimensions of sustainability that address the protection and promotion of universal human rights, as grounded in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights and codified in international agreements and treaties,<sup>10</sup> and/or labour rights, including rights related to health and safety in the workplace, payment of wages, working hours, child labour, forced labour, migrant workers and their families, and all principles concerning fundamental rights as set out in the International Labour Organisation Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.
- **Economic.** Refers to practices designed to create long-term economic development while also managing the environmental and social impacts of economic activities. Given that the protection of human rights, or any other sustainability objective, does not automatically follow from economic development, economic sustainability is about balancing economic growth and generating profits that have positive impacts on the environment and people.
- **Governance.** Covers dimensions of sustainability that address corporate governance, corruption, integrity, and disclosure issues.

#### **2.2.5. Subject**

This differentiator captures who or what is the subject that is targeted by the sustainability initiative's standards or activities.

##### *Potential attributes*

- **Not defined.** The sustainability initiative does not specify the subject.
- **Primary commodities, products, or services.** The requirements or activities of the sustainability initiative apply to primary commodities, products, or services.
- **Legal persons.** The requirements or activities of the sustainability initiative apply to companies (entire or site specific, such as a factory), partnerships, sustainability initiatives, institutions, or any other legal person.
- **Area/landscape.** The requirements or activities of the sustainability initiative apply to physical site or location (e.g. facility, forest area, protected area, landscape, fishery area).

### 2.2.6. Performance

This differentiator captures the level of the subject's performance that is targeted by the requirements or activities of the sustainability initiative. The level of performance can vary between sustainability practices, processes, or systems, and the expected outcome.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Practices, processes, systems.* The focus of the sustainability initiative is on targeting sustainability practices, processes, or systems.
- *Outcomes.* The focus of the sustainability initiative is on targeting sustainability outcomes of performing an economic activity.

### 2.2.7. Due diligence

This differentiator captures which aspects of responsible business conduct due diligence the sustainability initiative addresses through its requirements and/or activities.

#### *Potential attributes<sup>11</sup>*

- *Not defined.* The sustainability initiative does not specify any due diligence process, criteria, policy, or requirement.
- *Embed responsible business conduct.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to embed responsible business conduct due diligence into policies and management systems, and/or supports them in doing so.
- *Identify and assess actual and potential impacts.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to identify and assess actual and potential impacts associated with the enterprise's operations, products or services, including its suppliers and/or other business relationships, and/or supports them in doing so.
- *Cease, prevent and mitigate adverse impacts.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to cease, prevent and mitigate actual and potential adverse impacts, and/or supports them in doing so.
- *Track implementation and results.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to track the implementation and effectiveness of enterprises' due diligence activities, and/or supports them in doing so.
- *Communicate how impacts are addressed.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to publicly communicate externally relevant information on due diligence policies, processes, activities conducted, including the findings and outcomes of those activities, and/or supports them in doing so.
- *Provide for or co-operate in remediation when appropriate.* The sustainability initiative requires enterprises to provide for or cooperate in remediation when the enterprise identifies that it has caused or contributed to actual adverse impacts, and/or supports them in doing so.

## 2.3. Operations / implementation

This chapter includes differentiators that look at the system components that support implementation of the sustainability initiative to generate sustainability impacts. Table 2.3 reports the differentiators and potential attributes of the “operations” chapter.

**Table 2.3. Operations chapter of the typology framework**

Differentiators	Potential attributes
Assurance system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Assurance system defined</li> </ul>
Grievance mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Public grievance mechanism</li> </ul>
Chain of custody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided or required</li> <li>• Not defined</li> </ul>
Sustainability claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Non controlled</li> <li>• Controlled</li> </ul>
Monitoring and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Documented methodology</li> </ul>
Recognition of other initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Documented methodology</li> </ul>

### 2.3.1. Assurance system

This differentiator captures whether an assurance system exists. An assurance system is defined as the documented set of procedures and processes to demonstrate evidence that specified requirements relating to a product, process, system, person, or body are fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Assurance system not defined.* The sustainability initiative does not define any specific assurance system.
- *Assurance system defined.* The sustainability initiative defines an assurance system. More granular second level potential attributes can be defined to further differentiate amongst different types of assurance systems. Types of assurance systems can be defined in terms of the following.
  - *Assurance provider* (capturing the level of independence of assurance):
    - *First party.* Assurance performed by the subject targeted by the verification and based on its own determination. Also called a self-assessment or internal audit.
    - *Second party.* Assurance performed by a person or body that is related to, or has a user interest in, the subject targeted by the verification. This could be a supplier, customer, or contractor.
    - *Third party.* Assurance performed by a person or body that is independent of and with no user interest in the subject targeted by the verification.
    - *Third party with oversight.* Third party assurance activity with oversight through another third-party.
  - *Frequency of evaluation/assessment* (capturing the frequency of the sustainability initiative's evaluation activities)
    - *Not defined.* The frequency of the evaluation activities is not specified by the sustainability initiative.

- *Defined*. The sustainability initiative specifies rules and policies for the frequency of evaluation activities.
- *Evaluation structure* (capturing how the sustainability initiative assesses performance based on degree of conformance against requirements)
  - *Continuous improvement*. The sustainability initiative applies an evaluation structure, also referred to as progress models, that aims to incentivise progress over time. The evaluation structure can include mandatory or baseline criteria as well as aspirational or improvement criteria and may increase the number of requirements or performance levels over time.
  - *Scoring and threshold*. The sustainability initiative applies an evaluation structure, also referred to as scoring, where the assessment is based on meeting a subset of criteria, scoring levels, or set of performance levels or thresholds.
  - *Pass and fail*. The sustainability initiative applies an evaluation that aims to strictly determine compliance to requirements of the sustainability initiative in a binary pass or fail approach, with no granular scoring of compliance nor flexibility in timing of compliance.

### 2.3.2. Grievance mechanism

This differentiator reflects the extent to which the sustainability initiative claims to have a public grievance mechanism.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined*. The sustainability initiative does not have a public grievance mechanism.
- *Public grievance mechanism*. The sustainability initiative provides a public grievance mechanism to address complaints against the initiative, its employees and/or participating enterprises or their suppliers or other business partners.

### 2.3.3. Chain of custody (CoC) model

This differentiator captures whether the sustainability initiative requires or provides for the custodial sequence occurring as ownership or control of the material supply is transferred from one custodian to another in the value chain. Documenting chain of custody describes the list of all organisations (value chain) that take ownership or control of a product during production, processing, shipping, and retail (physically and/or administratively).<sup>13</sup>

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined*. The sustainability initiative does not provide or require CoC.
- *CoC provided or required*: The sustainability initiative defines CoC mechanisms, models and/or rules, or requires such mechanisms. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Identity preservation (IP)*. An IP model ensures that certified or assured product from a certified or assessed site or enterprise is kept separate from other sources. If used along the whole supply chain, it allows certified products to be uniquely traced through the production process, from the production site to the last point of transformation, or, where relevant, the labelling of a product.
  - *Segregation*. This model ensures that a certified product is kept separate from non-certified sources at each stage of the supply chain, allowing assurance that the ingredients of a particular product originate from certified sources, although it may not be possible to identify which molecule came from which certified source.

- *Mass balance.* Mass balance is an overarching term for different types of chain of custody which involve balancing volume reconciliation.
- *Certificate trading.* This is also known as “book and claim” and “credit trading”. In this model, certified material is completely decoupled from sustainability data. Certified and non-certified products flow freely through the supply chain. Sustainability certificates or credits are issued at the beginning of the supply chain by an independent issuing body and can be bought by market participants, usually via a certificate or credit-trading platform. A CoC model in which the administrative record flow is not necessarily connected to the physical flow of materials or products throughout the supply chain.

### **2.3.4. Sustainability claims**

This differentiator captures whether the sustainability initiative allows enterprises (or other legal persons that are the subject of the initiative) to make claims on the sustainability and/or responsibility of their operations, products or services. A sustainability claim is a message used to set apart and promote a product, process, business, or service with reference to one or more dimensions of sustainability.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined.* The sustainability initiative has no specific rules or documented methodology for claims and/or does not allow them.
- *Not controlled.* The sustainability initiative has a documented methodology for participating enterprises to make a claim that is used to promote an aspect of or relationship with the sustainability initiative, but which does not require approval for use of claims.
- *Controlled.* The sustainability initiative has a documented methodology for participating enterprises to make a claim that results from an assurance process against the requirements of the sustainability initiative and there is an approval system for use of claims. This attribute refers to claims on a product, process, business or service that has been certified in compliance with the requirements. For example, use of logos and labels on products.

### **2.3.5. Monitoring and evaluation**

This differentiator captures whether a sustainability initiative has a monitoring and evaluation system, i.e. an ongoing process through which a sustainability initiative draws conclusions about its contribution to intended outcomes and impacts. A monitoring and evaluation system consists of a set of interconnected functions, processes, and activities, including systematic collection of monitoring data on specified indicators, and the implementation of outcome and impact evaluation. The system could also incorporate a learning dimension (monitoring, evaluation, and learning), including processes to take appropriate measures in relationship to the results of the evaluation.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined.* The sustainability initiative has no formal monitoring and evaluation system.
- *Documented methodology.* The sustainability initiative has a formal process of collecting and analysing sources of data and information relevant to implementation of its requirements by its operators to monitor and evaluate whether the initiative is meeting its intended outcomes and impacts.

### 2.3.6. Recognition of other initiatives

This differentiator captures whether a sustainability initiative recognises other sustainability initiatives as a means for enterprises or other subjects of the initiative to meet its criteria or requirements. Recognition can include acceptance of third party trainings, supplier assessments, or other activities as a means to align with expectations or meet criteria or requirements. Recognition can be full or partial.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined.* No reliance on or recognition of other sustainability initiatives
- *Recognition through a documented methodology.* The sustainability initiative recognises all or part of another sustainability initiative as equivalent to its own requirements or activities through a documented methodology. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Horizontal recognition.* Recognition between peer initiatives for parts or all of the requirements (e.g. recognition of a peer initiative considered to meet relevant criteria, but covers a different supply chain, geographical, risk or other scope).
  - *Vertical recognition.* Recognition of initiatives for parts that the initiative does not cover itself through its requirements (e.g. another tier of the value chain or another commodity).

## 2.4. Governance

This chapter covers differentiators that help to understand key aspects of the governance of a sustainability initiative. Governance characterises here the nature of the initiative's owner(s), as well as the approaches taken to engage with stakeholders and disclose information around the initiative's activities. Table 2.4 reports the differentiators and potential attributes of the "governance" chapter.

**Table 2.4. Governance chapter of the typology framework**

Differentiators	Potential attributes
Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Private</li> </ul>
Stakeholder engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Stakeholder engagement</li> </ul>
Information disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not defined</li> <li>• Information disclosure</li> </ul>

### 2.4.1. Ownership

This differentiator captures the type of organisation(s) that legally own, manage, and implement the sustainability initiative.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Public.* The sustainability initiative is owned by a public entity. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Public national.* The sustainability initiative is owned by a government entity operating at national, regional, or local level providing services to the public or another public entity.
  - *Public international.* The sustainability initiative is owned by a multi-lateral organisation formed and funded by more than one government.

- *Private*. The sustainability initiative is owned by a private entity. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Private for profit*. The sustainability initiative is owned by a private enterprise(s) and legally registered as a for-profit enterprise which distributes profits to owners, investors, and shareholders. It may be publicly traded.
  - *Private not for profit*. The sustainability initiative is owned by a private enterprise(s) and legally registered as a not-for-profit enterprise which operates for a public good and “profits” are reinvested in the enterprise.

### **2.4.2. Stakeholder engagement**

This differentiator captures the extent to which the sustainability initiative claims to engage relevant stakeholders in key processes and activities. Stakeholders are defined as individuals or groups interested in or who will be affected by the decisions or activities of the scheme.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined*. No stakeholder engagement defined in governance of the sustainability initiative.
- *Stakeholder engagement defined*. The sustainability initiative engages stakeholders at varying capacity or responsibility across its activities. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Stakeholder engagement in boards and committees*. The sustainability initiative has a process to ensure that a balanced and diverse group of relevant stakeholders can participate in governance bodies, boards, and committees.
  - *Stakeholder engagement in monitoring and evaluation*. The sustainability initiative has a process to ensure that relevant stakeholders are involved in defining the monitoring and evaluation strategies.
  - *Stakeholder engagement in development of and revisions of initiative*. The sustainability initiative has a process to ensure that relevant stakeholders are involved in the development and revisions of tools, standards, etc.
  - *Stakeholder engagement in assurance systems*. The sustainability initiative has a process to ensure that relevant stakeholders are involved in the development and revision of assurance and oversight systems.

### **2.4.3. Information disclosure**

This differentiator reflects the extent to which the sustainability initiative claims to publish information on key topics.

#### *Potential attributes*

- *Not defined*. The sustainability initiative does not publish any information.
- *Information disclosed*. The initiative publishes some information. As more granular second level potential attributes, the following list could be used:
  - *Ownership and governance*. The sustainability initiative publishes information about its ownership and governance.
  - *Sustainability standard, guidance and policies*. The sustainability initiative publishes information about its standards, guidance, and policies. These can take the form of documents



that provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for products or services, or related processes and production methods, with which compliance is not mandatory. The term standard is inclusive of similar tools that define sustainability performance levels or improvement pathways (also referred to as code, principles and criteria (ISEAL, 2023<sup>[11]</sup>)).

- *Assessment results/reports.* The sustainability initiative publishes reports and findings of any assessments.
- *Assessment methodology.* The sustainability initiative publishes its assessment methodology.
- *Standard setting procedures.* The sustainability initiative publishes information on how standards are developed, how they are revised and who is responsible for decision making on standard setting.
- *Outcomes and impacts.* The sustainability initiative publishes information on its outcomes and impacts.

## 3. Conclusions

This joint ITC-OECD report presents a comprehensive, flexible, and value-neutral typology framework that aims to fostering a shared understanding of the multifaceted landscape of sustainability initiatives. By considering the diversity and complexity of sustainability initiatives, the typology framework offers a structured system of parameters and a common language that helps policy makers, private sector operators, NGOs, and other stakeholders not only understand the differences among sustainability initiatives but also better navigate and engage with them in various contexts.

As new efforts to engage with sustainability initiatives grow across policy areas, a common framework and definitions to navigate their landscape can promote a harmonised approach in creating synergies between sustainability initiatives and public policies. Further work is needed to advance the ongoing debate on how sustainability initiatives can be integrated, e.g. in trade policy or mandatory due diligence legislation. Establishing a shared understanding of the key parameters that differentiate sustainability initiatives, and the reasons behind these differences, is a crucial step toward developing coherent strategies and actionable policies that effectively integrate these initiatives into broader regulatory frameworks.

A shared system and language to identify with descriptive and value-neutral terms different types of sustainability initiatives is also useful for public, private and international organisations in developing, benchmarking, and promoting sustainability initiatives. Through this typology framework, the ITC and the OECD have developed a supporting tool with the aim to contributing to more responsible and sustainable supply chains.

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# Notes

<sup>1</sup> The creation of the Germany Demeter symbol for the certification of biodynamic farms in 1928 and the establishment of the British Soil Association in the United Kingdom in 1946 are examples of the early movement of standardisation in organic farming (Schleifer, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the OECD's Alignment Assessments, see <https://www.oecd.org/corporate/industry-initiatives-alignment-assessment.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.isealalliance.org/about-iseal/our-work/benchmarking>.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of international legal instruments for sustainability in GVCs include conventions, protocols, treaties, decisions and resolutions of the United Nations (UN) (e.g. the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN, 2011<sup>[16]</sup>)), the OECD (e.g. the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct (OECD, 2023<sup>[17]</sup>)) or the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (e.g. [ILO International Labour Standards](#)).

<sup>5</sup> For example, a recent analytical framework developed by the OECD to categorise government-backed, due-diligence related measures in agricultural supply chains considers both national and regional legislation (e.g. the [EU Deforestation regulation](#)) and government-led sustainability initiatives (e.g. the [German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa](#)) (OECD, 2024<sup>[15]</sup>).

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, a differentiator capturing the geographic scope of sustainability initiatives. A high-level differentiation based on geographic scope would be to distinguish between initiatives that have a specific geographic scope and those that do not. First-level potential attributes for this differentiator would then be specific geographic scope and non-defined geographic scope. Second-level potential attributes could consist of world regions or individual countries.

<sup>7</sup> The ITC Standards Map is available at <https://standardsmap.org/en/home>.

<sup>8</sup> The Ecolabel Index is available at <https://www.ecolabelindex.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> The ITC Standards Map provides comprehensive and harmonised information on a large population of sustainability initiatives, including voluntary sustainability standards, codes of conduct, audit protocols, reporting frameworks and company programs on sustainability. Data collection is managed through a robust process. It is based on desk-top evaluations of sustainability initiatives' written documents and standards against a framework of 1650 baseline indicators developed by the ITC, and it involves external control as well as systematic participation of sustainability initiatives throughout the process. More details

on this methodology are available at the dedicated webpage <https://resources.standardsmap.org/knowledge/>.

<sup>10</sup> International instruments on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples); persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities; women; children; and persons with disabilities have been elaborated under the framework of the United Nations.

<sup>11</sup> The attributes of the differentiator “due diligence” reflect the due diligence process as defined in the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#).

<sup>12</sup> The definition of assurance scheme follows ISEAL (2023<sup>[11]</sup>).

<sup>13</sup> Related, but not the same, is traceability which is the ability to trace a product or object through the supply or value chain and demonstrate CoC. This is done through the verification of the history, location, characteristics, or application of an item by means of documented recorded identification.

# Understanding Sustainability Initiatives

## A TYPOLOGY FRAMEWORK

This joint ITC-OECD report presents a comprehensive, flexible, and value-neutral typology framework that aims to promote a shared understanding of the complex landscape of sustainability initiatives. Taking into account the diverse and multifaceted nature of sustainability initiatives, the typology framework offers a structured system of parameters and a common language to support policy makers, private sector operators, NGOs, and other stakeholders in assessing the differences between sustainability initiatives.



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