

Walking Together with Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) in India

23 August, 2019, Third Meeting Report, New Delhi



'An initiative of Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) for Sustainability Standards organisations operating in India to be better informed about each other's initiatives and explore opportunities to collaborate'

1. Introduction

On 17 January, 2019 the [Centre for Responsible Business](#) launched a special initiative ‘Walking together with Voluntary Sustainability Standards in India’ with the objective to initiate *dialogue for better understanding among existing VSS organisations and collaborate on areas of common interest and challenges*. The initiative entails physical quarterly meetings in Delhi (once every 3 months) with VSS organisations working in India with the intent to share lessons and good practices, exchange knowledge on policy developments and other emerging trends and identify common areas of interest to work together on. Colleagues, who are outside of Delhi are connected virtually, to enable them to also participate in the discussions.

On 23 August, 2018 CRB organized the **third meeting** in New Delhi. The meeting was attended by eight different VSS organizations (please refer to Annexure 1)¹. The meeting was structured around the following agenda points:

- **Introduction to an Online B2B Marketplace for Sustainable Certified Products** (new initiative of CRB) – CRB to share the idea of an **online platform** for certified, sustainable products CRB is currently working in partnership with an IT Company (**RIJIT SENGUPTA, CRB**)
- **CRB 6th Annual Sustainability Conference, 20-22 November, 2019, New Delhi** - an overview of the Annual Conference 2019 and various sessions and opportunities for VSS and other organizations to engage/participate - especially based on the outcomes of the discussions in the previous meeting in May. (**NANDINI SHARMA, CRB**)
- **ISEAL Alliance’s Standards Credibility Principles Review** – initiate a discussion on [ISEAL’s Credibility Principles](#). In 2013, ISEAL developed [the Credibility Principles](#) for Standards, these Principles are undergoing a review process wherein inputs are being gathered from VSS stakeholders to:
 - ✓ Capture stakeholders' evolving vision of credibility
 - ✓ Capture stakeholder input on a broader application of the Credibility Principles
 - ✓ Capture stakeholder input on how the Credibility Principles can be improved as a communication tool (**NORMA TREGURTHA & VIDYA RANGAN, ISEAL ALLIANCE**)

¹ 17 different VSS Organisations have participated in this initiative thus far

2. Meeting Summary

Online B2B Marketplace for Sustainable Certified Products - The Idea

- Rijit share the 'Core Idea' of a Sustainable Marketplace that CRB has envisioned as a discovery platform for buyers and sellers of sustainable certified products to connect and transact.
- This idea that CRB has, rests heavily on the support and partnership of VSS organizations – ones who CRB has been engaging through this initiative and beyond. VSS organisations also have their own processes and methods of promoting and marketing their products, which would be critical for the success of this platform, to connect. Broadly, it was felt by some of the VSS participants that this initiative would further strengthen the possibility for these products to find customers.

Inputs/Comments from Participants

While commending CRB on its initiative, the members also offered their valuable feedback and suggestions in support of the initiative, as follows:

- It was pointed out that some of the VSS organisations do not certify products, instead they work directly with the businesses (and certify entire companies) and therefore the **platform** will have to be adjusted accordingly, if it intends to accommodate such standards (e.g. RJC).
- VSS members collectively emphasised on the need to design a strategy for building **consumer awareness** and **customer reach**, as this would have a direct impact on the overall uptake and the commercial viability of the initiative. Although the platform is currently envisaged to be a business to business (B2B) platform, the communication strategy around the initiative must be carefully conceptualised keeping in mind the customer or ultimate/final user of the product.

Action & Way forward

- CRB ensured the VSS members to develop one-of-a-kind interactive e-commerce model to engage and outreach with the youth. The initiative would involve development and implementation of a 'niche' but growing demand in the market leveraging international experience/networks, collaboratively working with various voluntary standards organisations.

- The Sustainable marketplace initiative by CRB is a continuous process and is in its early stage of development, requiring more standards to be a part of this conversation. CRB is also doing research in parallel to be able to think-through potential challenges and opportunities. The platform is expected to be soft-launched at **CRB's 6th Annual Conference 'India Sustainability Standards'** from 20-22 November 2019, at the EROS Hotel, New Delhi.

2.2 CRB 6th Annual Sustainability Conference (*India & Sustainability Standards*), 20-22 November, 2019, New Delhi - Overview

- The Annual Conference is CRB's flagship initiative, designed with the objective of bringing together a diverse stakeholder group to explore **opportunities** for promoting sustainable business and overcoming **challenges** through dialogue and consensus building. The theme for this year's Conference is ***'Market Dynamics & Social Dilemmas of Promoting Sustainable Business'***.
- For more details on the Conference, please visit us at: www.sustainabilitystandards.in/

Inputs/Comments from Participants

- The VSS identified consumers, particularly the youth as important catalysts in the uptake of voluntary standards by the industry. Hence, targeted engagement on educating and informing the youth would be central to the uptake and demand for sustainable businesses. Having said that, it was also well noted that the average (common) Indian consumer is price sensitive. In the light of the above, it was felt that other important stakeholders such as the financial sector, endorsements by the government must be ensured as well. This would reduce the price burden of uptake of sustainability standard among Indian consumers.
- Another issue raised in the discussion was the multiplicity and complexity of sustainability standards which makes their adoption by the SMSEs and smallholders rather difficult. It was felt that the CRB's initiative on engagement with VSS can serve as the right forum to address this challenge through collective action. In this regard some of the opportunities identified include:
 - to work with SMEs and Smallholders to understand their challenges in uptake, to help build understanding and buy-in of key actors (business value)

- to showcase the value proposition through competitive advantage (market access, etc.)
- to address issues that support implementation (good practice approaches and models, government partnership, etc.)

Action & Way forward

- It was felt that both the aforementioned issues raised by the VSS members require further deliberations and engagement on the issue with the concerned stakeholders. It was felt that, CRB's Annual Conference could serve as the springboard for fostering and promoting these discussions. Therefore, the possibility of curating sessions should be explored involving multiple (and relevant) VSS on SMEs and on Smallholders. It was also indicated that a session on Youth for Sustainability was also being organised.
- CRB is already in the process of designing a session on youth for sustainability and assured the VSS members that it would take the ideas and suggestions presented forward when developing the session.

2.3 ISEAL Standards Credibility Principles: Review

ISEAL Alliance is currently in the process of reviewing their **Credibility Principles** developed in 2013. As part of the review process it urged the VSS stakeholders in India to be forthcoming with their inputs on the following points:

- Stakeholders' evolving vision of credibility
- Stakeholder input on a broader application of the Credibility Principles
- Stakeholder input on how the Credibility Principles can be improved as a communication tool

How credibility of a standard can be explained?

- Taking the discussion forward, Vidya Rangan posed 2 questions before the participants:
 1. List **5 core ideas / values / principles** one would expect to see (or expect stakeholder to want) in a system that is 'credible';
 2. In 5 years, will stakeholders have the same expectations of sustainability standards as of other sustainability initiatives?
- Rijit Sengupta, CRB quoted a public regulator he met years ago who while talking about their success in being an efficient regulator had said, "We changed from being the police to being the doctor, and that helped". This powerful realization highlight that rather than being an enforceable checklist, standards application should entail a long-term

consultative relationship (between the VSS organisations and the beneficiaries) with the client being supported for them to diagnose issues and find resolutions.

- Saji Kadavil, Rainforest Alliance, stated that trust and the ability to effectively communicate/instill this trust to the stakeholders is the most important factor to ensure credibility.
- A number of responses were listed down by the VSS organisation in terms of their understanding of the term 'credibility' as below:
 - Trustworthiness
 - Fairness
 - Transparency
 - Assurance
 - Traceability
 - Efficiency
 - Impartiality
 - Sustainability
 - Accessibility
 - Relevance
 - Documented
 - Impactful



- The discussion raised questions on what makes a standard **trustworthy**? Or what would make the Indian government or Indian consumer or Indian businessman 'trust' a standard? This is important because there are 500+ voluntary sustainability standards in the world today to choose from. So, what are those values and principles that make it trustworthy or credible standards? What are the factors that would enable reinforce this trust for standards in Indian context?

Action & Way forward

- The discussion concluded with VSS members agreeing on values and principles such as transparency, trust, and proof of concept, ground level impact, engagement, accessibility, efficiency, relevance and continuous improvements as the basis for engendering credibility for sustainability standards.

Annexure 1: List of participants

S. No	Name of the participant	Organisation
1	Archana Panda	Social Accountability International
2	Ashok Mishra	GoodWeave
3	Devyani Hari	Centre for Responsible Business
4	Kinjal Shah	Responsible Jewellery Council
5	Mousumi Sarangi	Fair Wear Foundation
6	Nandini Sharma	Centre for Responsible Business
7	Norma Tregurtha	ISEAL Alliance
8	Rahul Bhajekar	Global Organic Textile Standards
9	Rakesh Supkar	Traidcraft
10	Rijit Sengupta	Centre for Responsible Business
11	Saji Kadavil	Rainforest Alliance
12	Sandeep Chopra	GoodWeave
13	Sonali Paikaray	Centre for Responsible Business
14	Sumit Gupta	Global Organic Textile Standards
15	Tarini	Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests (NCCF)
16	Varun Grover	Network for Certification and Conservation of Forests (NCCF)
17	Vidya Rangan	ISEAL Alliance

Annexure 2: Presentations

- [CRB's Sixth Annual Flagship Conference 2019](#)
- [ISEAL Alliance Presentation](#)