

Sustainability indicators for bioenergy and the broader bioeconomy

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Acronyms

EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GBEP	Global Bioenergy Partnership
GHG	greenhouse gas(es)
GSI	GBEP sustainability indicators
IEA	International Energy Agency
IEA Bio	International Energy Agency Bioenergy Technology Collaboration Program
ISBWG	International Sustainable Bioeconomy Working Group (of FAO)
NGO	Environmental Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RED	Renewable Energy Directive (of the EU)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
UN	United Nations

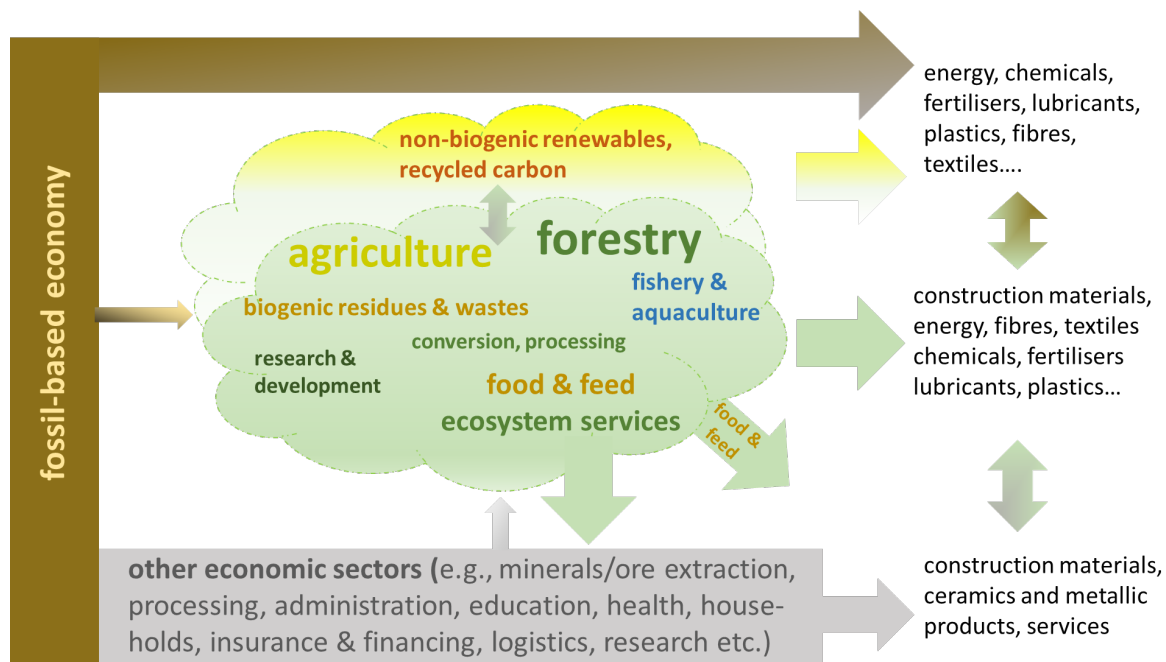
1. Introduction and Overview

The call for a global transformation towards sustainable development and the respective Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were agreed upon in the UN Agenda 2030 in September 2015 (UN 2015). Bioenergy and the broader bioeconomy are considered **as means** with significant opportunities for a more sustainable use of renewable resources, and for reducing fossil fuel use. The **bioeconomy** – and bioenergy as part of it – provides key opportunities to achieving the SDGs, and to contribute to a “green” recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. For this, though, it is crucial to assuring the sustainability of the bioeconomy.

This paper¹ provides an overview of the status and recent developments of **indicators** for the sustainability of bioenergy and bioeconomy and derives some recommendations for further work of the Sustainability Task of the Global Bioenergy Partnership².

In the following, bioeconomy is understood³ as the "(...) production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value-added products, such as food, feed, bio-based products as well as bio-energy" (EC 2018). A sustainable bioeconomy is part of the renewable segment of the circular economy (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Scope and system boundaries of the bioeconomy



Source: Fritsche et al. (2020); yellow- and green-shaded clouds represent renewable economy, green-shaded cloud represents bioeconomy (as part of renewable economy); right side represents outputs to society (products and services); arrows = outputs; double-arrows = substitution potentials

The bioeconomy - and bioenergy as part of it - is related to several SDG (see Figure 2) and can help to achieve these goals (Blair et al. 2021; Calicioglu & Bogdanski 2021; Heimann 2019).

¹ A previous paper discussed **governance approaches** for the sustainability of the bioeconomy (Fritsche et al. 2021).

² www.globalbioenergy.org

³ There are many different definitions of what the bioeconomy is – e.g., the OECD and the US refer mostly to “new” economic activities based on biotechnology.

Figure 2 Links between bioenergy and the SDGs

SDG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Key wording	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	Reduce inequality within and among countries	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
Link type	(✓)	✓ (✓)	(✓)		(✓)	(✓)	✓ (✓)	✓ (✓)	(✓)	(✓)	✓ (✓)	✓	✓ (✓)	✓	✓		(✓)

 = Safeguard
  = Driver
 (✓) = Partially relevant

Source: GBEP (2020) based on analysis in Fritsche et al. (2018)

As Iriarte & Fritsche (2019) showed for Latin American countries, the GSI can not only linked to the SDG but also contribute to measuring several of the SDG indicators.

In the following, the issue of “relevant” indicators is discussed.

As sustainability indicators were first developed for bioenergy, the discussion starts with those (Section 2) and is then expanded to sustainability indicators for the broader bioeconomy (Section 3), and the final Section 4 provides some recommendations on the future selection and use of sustainability indicators with a view to practicality.

2. Indicators for sustainable bioenergy

Sustainability governance requires to establish **measurements** of sustainability, i.e., to operationalize the concept through evidence-based criteria and respective indicators.

Already in 2011, the Global Bioenergy Partnership (GBEP) established, after more than two years of intense discussions, a set of indicators to measure the sustainability of bioenergy on the national level (GBEP 2011) that has been applied in several countries (GBEP 2020; IINAS 2020).

The result of the work is the set of 24 GBEP sustainability indicators (GSI) for bioenergy (see Figure 3) which provide policy-makers and stakeholders with a tool to guide any analysis of bioenergy undertaken at the domestic level.

Figure 3 The GBEP Sustainability Indicators for Bioenergy



Source: GBEP (2020) based on GBEP (2011)

In 2015, the International Organization for Standardization published “Sustainability criteria for bioenergy” as ISO 13065 (ISO 2015) which was recently reviewed and confirmed⁴. This ISO standard is fully compatible with the GSI.

Various other proposals for sustainability criteria and indicators for bioenergy have been elaborated⁵. As Fritsche (2019) showed, the state of the art is still captured by the GSI.

3. Indicators for a sustainable bioeconomy

Given the close interaction of agriculture, forestry, food and the materials and energy sectors it seems appropriate to consider **all biomass** under the **bioeconomy** concept, i.e., to assess the sustainability not only of bioenergy uses, but of **all uses** of biomass (see Figure 1). The reasoning behind this consideration is that

“Binding sustainability criteria established for the bioenergy sector but not for other sectors using the same feedstocks may provoke leakages and trade-offs between sectors as well as debates on a meaningful sustainability performance” (Mai-Moulin et al. 2021: 13).

With growing policy interest in the bioeconomy (see e.g., IACGB 2020), the need to ensure its sustainability is rising in parallel (see e.g., Kircher 2022; OECD 2021a+b). A broad variety of respective criteria and indicators for its sustainability has been developed and proposed, often building on the GBEP indicators for bioenergy⁶.

The EU S2Biom project proposed “basic” and “advanced” sets of sustainability indicators for the bioeconomy which reflect “minimal requirements”, and then add further indicator options to cover broader sustainability issues of the bioeconomy (Iriarte et al. 2017), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 The S2Biom Sustainability Indicators for the Bioeconomy

Theme	Criterion	Indicator		Level of ambition							
		#	Indicator	Basic				Advanced			
				Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive	Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive
Environmental	1. Resource use	1.1	Land use efficiency			✓		✓			
		1.2	Secondary resource efficiency			✓		✓			
		1.3	Energy efficiency		✓			✓			
		1.4	Functionality (Output service quality)						✓	✓	

⁴ See <https://www.iso.org/standard/52528.html>

⁵ See for recent work e.g., Cucuzzella, Welfle & Röder (2020); FAO (2017); Koper et al. (2021); Mai-Moulin (2020); Mai-Moulin et al. (2021); Szarka et al. (2020).

⁶ See e.g., Bracco et al. (2019); Egenolf et al. (2018); Egenolf & Bringezu (2019); Escobar & Britz (2021); FAO (2019a+b, 2021); Fritsche & Rösch (2020); Golaszewski et al. (2020); Hennenberg et al. (2019); Holden et al. (2022); INRO (2013); Iriarte & Fritsche (2014); Iriarte et al. (2017); Kardung et al. (2021); Kooduvalli et al. (2019); Ladu et al. (2018); Möller et al. (2020); Nel et al. (2022); OECD (2013, 2021a+b); Pelkmans et al. (2016); STAR-ProBio (2018); van Schoubroeck et al. (2018); Zeug, Bezema & Thrän (2020); Zhu et al. (2019).

Theme	Criterion	Indicator		Level of ambition							
		#	Indicator	Basic				Advanced			
				Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive	Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive
	2. Climate change	2.1	Life cycle-based CO ₂ eq including direct land use change	✓				✓			
		2.2	Other GHG emissions		✓	✓		✓			
	3. Biodiversity	3.1	Protected areas and land with significant biodiversity values	✓				✓			
		3.2	Biodiversity conservation and management			✓		✓			
	4. Soil	4.1	Erosion			✓		✓			
		4.2	Soil Organic Carbon			✓		✓			
		4.3	Soil nutrient balance			✓		✓			
	5. Water	5.1	Water availability and regional water stress		✓			✓		✓	
		5.2	Water use efficiency						✓	✓	
		5.3	Water quality		✓				✓	✓	
	6. Air	6.1	SO ₂ equivalents		✓	✓		✓			
		6.2	PM ₁₀		✓	✓		✓			
Social	7. Participation and transparency	7.1	Effective participatory processes								✓
		7.2	Information transparency								✓
	8. Land tenure	8.1	Land tenure assurance			✓		✓			
	9. Employment and labour rights	9.1	Full direct jobs equivalents along the full value chain		✓	✓			✓	✓	
		9.2	Full direct jobs equivalent in the biomass		✓	✓			✓	✓	

Theme	Criterion	Indicator		Level of ambition							
		#	Indicator	Basic				Advanced			
				Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive	Minimum requirement	Comparative (non-renewable reference)	Comparative (biomass reference)	Descriptive
			consuming region (or country)								
		9.3	Human and Labour Rights	✓				✓			
		9.4	Occupational safety and health for workers	✓				✓			
	10. Health risks	10.1	Risks to public health								✓
	11. Food, fuelwood and other products	11.1	Food, fuelwood and other products supply security			✓		✓			
Economic	12. Production costs	12.1	Current levelised life-cycle cost		✓	✓			✓	✓	
		12.2	Future levelised life-cycle costs						✓	✓	

Source: Iriarte et al. (2017), building on Iriarte & Fritsche (2014)

The indicator list in Figure 4 is surely not “complete”, as others (see e.g., Footnote 6) have added more specific items: For example, the FAO identified more than 100 indicators for the sustainability of the bioeconomy (Bracco et al. 2019). Yet, this extensive list has a rather broad overlap to the S2Biom list, as analysis in ifeu (2022) has shown, and the FAO list has massive data requirements.

The “minimum requirement” indicators from S2Biom in the basic set are a significant reduction of the overall number compared to other work indicated in Footnote 6, and provide the base for the consideration of the “downsizing” approach discussed in Section 5.1.

It should be noted that in parallel to work on the analysis and assessment of the bioeconomy sustainability, the more general concept for governing the sustainability of the bioeconomy has been elaborated: **monitoring**, i.e., the development of the bioeconomy sustainability over time.

ifeu (2022) provides a synopsis of respective work, and concludes that

“(…) the GSI prove to be still useful baseline to frame all the indicators under study, since

- they capture most of the indicator proposed by the analysed studies being much more recent and focused on bioeconomy*
- only few new themes need to be added to complete the picture and*
- most of these added themes represent further specifications or variations of existing GSI” (ifeu 2022: 22).*

4. Perspective: Sustainability indicators for bioenergy and the bioeconomy

The discussion in the previous sections clearly indicate the need to consider sustainability indicators **for both** bioenergy, and the broader bioeconomy. This need could be addressed through three different options:

- **Downsizing** to radically reduce the number of indicators to the absolute minimum.
- **Improving** to reflect application experiences for improving the applicability and data availability (especially “proxy” indicators).
- **Dashboard** which opens the indicator scope widely and relies on applicant/participant choices of relevant indicators.

4.1. “Downsizing”

This rather **radical** approach reflects experiences from practical applications of the GBEP indicators (see ifeu 2022) and simplifies the metrics to the minimum requirements for the sustainability of bioenergy and the bioeconomy. Building on the S2Biom “minimum requirements” and reflecting available data, the list would be comprised of the following indicators:

- GHG emissions and biodiversity protection
- Employment and secure land tenure
- Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

The GHG emission indicator should include impacts from direct land use changes (if any) and biodiversity protection should be expressed as “no-go” areas for biomass extraction or collection and should include clarification on using genetically modified organisms (GMO)⁷. The multiple other aspects (e.g., air pollution, soil erosion, water stress) are not considered as irrelevant, but hard to quantify and subject to local and regional circumstances.

The employment (number of jobs) and the “secure land tenure” indicator stand for the social pillar and should reflect the number of direct jobs related to the bioeconomy, while the land tenure indicator should be covered by a proxy: the adherence of country (or region) to the VGGT⁸.

The GDP indicator should be available in all countries – yet the specific contribution of the bioeconomy might be hard to isolate. In this case, the economic turnover (from investments in and operation of bioeconomy facilities and sales of respective products/services) could be used as a proxy.

For all five “basic” indicators, though, the issue of territorial scope should be clarified, i.e., if the indicators should apply only for the national (or sub-national) territory or should include impacts from imported biomass as well. The latter is relevant especially for the GHG emissions, as climate change is a **global** concern.

4.2. “Improving”

Instead of reducing the number of indicators, the list could be **improved** to reflect experiences from indicator applications, and the additional requirements for covering some of the specific bioeconomy issues.

⁷ GMOs are typically not used in bioenergy value chains (except in some countries for corn and soy) but can play some role in the broader bioeconomy.

⁸ Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security on 11 May 2012, see <https://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i2801e/i2801e.pdf>

As ifeu (2022) has shown, most sustainability indicators discussed or proposed in the literature, or used by various actors such as banks, governments, or within sustainability standards are either directly derived from the GSI, or small variations of those. The most relevant exception is the use of GMOs which should be added either under biodiversity protection (as in the “downsizing” approach) or under indicators covering public or occupational health.

On the other hand, several of the GSI seem to be either impractical due to data restrictions, or not so much relevant for the broader discussion of the bioeconomy:

GSI 13 (unpaid time spent by woman and children collecting biomass), GSI 15 (Change in mortality and burden of disease attributable to indoor smoke) as well as GSI 18 (Net energy balance), GSI 21 (Training and re-qualification of the workforce) and GSI 23 (Infrastructure and logistics for distribution of bioenergy) may be removed from the GSI list. This would allow to add a few more indicators relevant for bioenergy and the broader bioeconomy such as e.g., use of organic waste and food losses, or gender equality.

Any change in the GSI would be subject to approval of the GBEP partners, though.

4.3. “Dashboard”

Following-up on the FAO’s broad proposal for bioeconomy sustainability indicators (Bracco et al. 2019) and the work of the EU’s Bioeconomy Knowledge Centre on monitoring of the EU bioeconomy⁹, a general “dashboard” of indicators is possible with provides the broadest thematic and territorial view on available indicators and respective data.

Under this approach, users would select the indicators of interest, and be provided with respective data – subject to availability.

The ongoing work on the EU level (and its Member States) and related work in the US indicate that this approach seems applicable at least for some of the GBEP member countries – yet, the data requirements and overall work on a **global** “dashboard” appears to be beyond the resources of the GBEP.

Thus, the recommendation to GBEP to consider either the “downsizing” or “improving” approach for its future work in the Task Force on Sustainability.

⁹ See https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/bioeconomy/monitoring_en and respective reports, especially Giuntoli et al. (2020); JRC (2020a+b); Kilsedar et al. (2021); Melim-Mcleod et al. (2022); Ronzon et al. (2020)

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