

Summary of Round Table Discussions on Environmental Footprints

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This report is a summary of the round table discussion on the network conference about European Environmental Footprints (methods and applications). The conference took part on February 20, 2020 in Stockholm with life cycle professionals among Swedish Life Cycle Center partners and invited guests.

The purpose of these discussions:

- Give a chance to learn from each other and discuss Environmental Footprint (EF) with other lifecycle professionals
- Give Swedish Life Cycle Center and the Expert group input on where to focus the work with EF during the transition phase

The conference participants were divided into smaller groups based on their interest and background. A bank of questions was sent to the participants before the conference took part. See Appendix A.

Greatest potential of Environmental footprints

Environmental footprints (EF) could be a good way to improve product performance and sustainability performance and pressure the industry to move towards a more sustainable path.

The most important outcomes of the Environmental footprint process have been consensus discussions in some long standing LCA questions and an increased interest in life cycle assessment and life cycle perspective in general. EF gives also credibility to LCA as a method.

Harmonization, credibility, comparability and transparency, words which were highlighted in most of the discussions during the round table session. It was a consensus among the participants that EF will influence on these.

The learning process of EF is one of the greatest benefits when it comes to knowledge building around a product, especially internally for companies, but it could also be a way to inform consumers and other about environmental impacts of different products, which will contribute to more informed decisions and a responsible production and consumption.

The greatest potentials of EF were discussed in the round tables. It is of advantage for companies to use only one method for all products everywhere. The greatest benefits of a harmonized method are that it will give a higher credibility when communicating to consumers and that comparable numbers will put the competitiveness on the same level. This is necessary to make environmental claims in marketing.

Obstacles that needs to be considered

How this will affect different organizations might differ. The biggest actors may be in favor and it will be difficult for smaller actors to take any actions. The process will cost a lot of money and be time-consuming for companies. There is a risk that resources will be moved to reporting and making the PEFs, when it should be used for improvements and product development for e.g.

It might also be a challenge when getting information/data from suppliers and a risk of more low-quality data at inventory level. This will give advantage to companies, which already have data in place.

To make EF happen, more LCA experts are needed to support these actions. This also put a pressure on new ways to streamline the LCA work. To make PEF happen, it is of importance to support companies, especially SMEs with data

collection for e.g. In general, education was brought up as important for all actors in the society.

When use PEF?

The target audience is customers, but PEF might be more useful business to business. Companies are able to manage more detailed information with separate environmental impact categories.

PEF puts a pressure on companies to both work and communicate with suppliers, which is important when making improvements along the supply chain.

“For our company, we see that Environmental footprint could be used as a foundation for internal steering, education and understanding”

EF is also a way to inform consumers about environmental impacts and a helpful way to make comparable claims. One universal measure unit will also be easier to understand for customers, and it will also be good for showing improvements. Some of the groups agreed on that PEF is not yet ready for consumer use.

The policy processes

EF is most useful for product categories with largest impact and improvement potential. It is effective governance when compare to testing and verification of e.g. eco design.

Mandatory or voluntary were brought up on most of the round tables. This is a European harmonization, if you have suppliers outside EU, PEF would be difficult. Will it be accepted by foreign countries exporting products to Europe or is there a need to accept something “equivalent” to use some terminology from Public Procurement?

PEF should perhaps be of an encouraging nature. Mandatory request need government control.

The round tables aimed to discuss the policy issues also discussed different levels of PEF. Are there any possibilities to put less requirements for SMEs? Could it be of interest to agree on different levels on PEF: from basic to advanced?

One researcher brought up that “for policy purposes I think that it may be more efficient to work with LCA on a broader basis to identify important policy

measures that can drive development overall towards reduced environmental impact.” Among the round tables there were overall some skepticism towards putting responsibility on consumers for making real improvements.

Methodology improvements

The round tables on methods discussed further method development of PEF. Raised on several tables was the important issue on duration, how to get a scientific way of getting the lifespan of a product standardized. The circularity and allocation areas were discussed and needs further development to support different needs and actions, not just recycling.

How should attributional and consequential LCA be specified in EF? was asked and it was a skepticism for weighting in communication to consumers.

Collaboration with EPD systems and UNEP-SETAC guidelines are important to create further harmonization in the methodology.

How to make EF happen?

Education about LCA and EF is needed. We need to educate students, policy makers and business to make this change. For SMEs, it could be an idea to start really small, with one or two categories or start with simplified EPDs. Students (thesis work) can play an important role for SMEs. For Sweden, it is important to work for a national life cycle database, which will support all companies, especially SMEs.

We also asked the participants to go to themselves and ask for actions by themselves or by their organization. Most of the participant were interested in following the process and try to understand how the process and decisions will affect their business or work. Building knowledge internally and spreading information to our clients were also mentioned by many of the participants as important for the coming year.

Questions such as; What if there are no PEFCRs? And how to deal with B2B connections not modelling PEFs? Were mentioned as important to better understand.

“PEF and similar initiatives have helped put life cycle thinking on the agenda. I experience this clearly as a researcher and teacher. There is high interest from students and other research

groups (who are not into LCA, but ask for support on doing LCAs)”

One company also wanted to engage students to investigate if PEF would be relevant to them.

For consultancies, it is of relevance to inform customers about the implications of the EF when launched.

Invitation to all: Start testing PEF and parts of PEF to better understand how it will affect your company and your decisions and go into some methodology issues to better understand or influence the development of them.

The role of Swedish Life Cycle Center

The conference took the opportunity to gather further ideas and improvements for Swedish Life Cycle Center to work with.

The participants agreed on further discussions on EF within the center, in round table format or research and for the expert group to take actions on.

The center has an important role to work for a national LCA database, give support and advise in this area and support with information on the process and effects, but also how to get more support.

The center is also an important arena to influence the overall European process and be part of the methodology and application developments. It was also raised that the center through the expert group should work for continued improvements of EF.

The activities are listed in Appendix B and available for Swedish Life Cycle Center partners.

Appendix A

For all tables

- What are the greatest benefits of a harmonized method for assessing the environmental impact of products/organizations in a life-cycle perspective?

Assume that the EU commission puts out a legislative proposal that requires companies to use PEF/OEF if they are to make any statements on their environmental performance. PEF/OEF shall also be used in public procurement, in ecolabels and in other environmental policies regarding products. This is going to be implemented in January 2022 at the latest.

- How would this affect your organization?
- What actions would your organization have to take?

Topics

1. Method

- What are the most important areas for further development within the method during the transition phase? How can your organization, the Swedish Life Cycle Center and other Swedish organizations contribute to this development?
- Is there a need for aligning method development further with e.g. the LCA research community, standards, or EPD? If so, how can this be achieved?

2. Industry

- Which are the driving forces for your company to be engaged in the development of the EF? To better support you and your organizations' need, what needs to be improved and how?
- How can the results from PEFs be communicated? How would you like them to be communicated?
- What needs to be done to support SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises)? How can the Swedish Life Cycle Center and other Swedish organizations contribute to making PEF/OEF usable for all types of organizations?

3. Policy

- What are the policy areas where EF can be most useful? Where should it not be used? Which are the benefits and drawbacks?
- How to sustain a system – what are the requirements for an effective governance system? Who should be in charge of implementing and updating EF?

- How can your organization, the Swedish Life Cycle Center and other Swedish organizations contribute to the policy applications of PEF/OEF?

The last ten minutes of the round table were dedicated to a questionnaire with following questions.

- What do you see as the most positive possible outcomes from EF for you or your organization?
- What questions/issues will you and your organization be working with during the year within the framework of PEF and OEF?
- What areas do you see as the most important for Swedish life cycle center to work with within EF? This can also include areas to focus on for the EF Expert group.
- Do you have any additional comments that you would like to send to the EF Expert group that they can take with to higher level?