

# TNS Commentary on VinylPlus Progress Report for 2016

The Natural Step acts as an external advisor, stakeholder intermediary and capacity builder to VinylPlus. Our comments here are based on our 'outside-in' sustainability perspective on the industry and from engaging directly with VinylPlus throughout the year.

## Celebrate the Wins but Avoid Complacency

We are pleased to observe continued year-on-year progress within the VinylPlus industry sustainability roadmap for the PVC sector in Europe, as reported in this publication. In some respects, 2016 was a year that created both momentum and recognition. In particular, the audited confirmation that lead substitution from European PVC production is complete, an award acknowledging VinylPlus' contribution to the circular economy and supportive messages from, and engagement with, key stakeholders. These wins should be celebrated and used as motivation.

At the same time we continue to face urgent and mounting sustainability challenges, and there is an acknowledgement of difficulties in hitting certain targets and in meeting increasing stakeholder demands. For example, our Dutch representatives participated in the VinylPlus Sustainability Forum this year and gave a clear message that downstream actors and public sector organisations are in need of tools to help understand and select PVC products that meet the highest sustainability performance and management standards. We again emphasise the relevance of and need for the VinylPlus labelling scheme as a critical tool in light of this.

## Continued Work Needed to Secure a Place for PVC Products

The policy framework for the circular economy in Europe and, in particular, high-level investigations on a roadmap for plastics demonstrate how far we are from a sustainable society and the potential for change in resource flows within the economy. These conversations will continue to influence the PVC market, and indeed stakeholders will continue to ask where PVC products can be responsibly used in the circular economy and under what conditions. A clearer European stance on performance expectations and a focus on the applications where PVC offers the most sustainable value would go a long way in the dialogue in Europe and with the PVC industry globally.

The additives used in PVC formulations are critical in determining functional benefits, different applications for PVC products, impacts and management regimes. Therefore, we believe this topic is a priority and we welcome the additional studies looking into specific additives, including the conditions for safe and responsible use of legacy additives in recycled PVC.

In 2016 we also engaged more directly in the VinylPlus Additives Task Force and can state that there is renewed progress on piloting the Additive Sustainable Footprint methodology and criteria for assessing the sustainable use of additives. This is a priority as a building block for showing where attention is needed, where progress is being made and as a context for discussion with policy-makers and other stakeholders.

## Making Use of TNS Support and Methods

From The Natural Step's point of view, we constantly evaluate our ability to influence industry and support its transformation toward sustainability. This is connected to our engagement and the use of methods we promote – both are available to anyone committed to the journey of sustainable development.

A business-NGO collaboration requires a good deal of trust and dialogue between people to stay on the path and we appreciate the opportunity to give critical input and advice to VinylPlus. At the same time, we provide a well-recognized open-source framework and a set of peer-reviewed principles to interpret the scientific requirements for sustainability and define paths to reach it. Each industry or actor can use these methods to interpret their challenges, set priorities and deliver results that match stakeholder expectations.

We make this point to encourage more actors to communicate how they are actively using such tools and share the results they are achieving on their own. A focus for us is also to provide additional guidance to enable that to occur, and in 2016 we undertook activities with VinylPlus to communicate how The Natural Step's approach provides the rationale and scientific guideposts for the circular economy.

## Staying up to Date with Sustainability Science and Business application

We feel it is also relevant to communicate updates to research underpinning The Natural Step, since the VinylPlus platform builds upon it. The sustainability principles (system conditions) have recently undergone a major revision with a new set of criteria and definitions for social sustainability. It is a priority for us now to ensure that all our stakeholders take note of these developments<sup>69</sup> to stay up to date and make use of the additional guidance now available.

We can also observe that setting science-based targets is becoming an increasingly recognized approach for individual businesses. New developments such as the Future-Fit Business Benchmark<sup>70</sup> translate The Natural Step's thinking into a set of 'must-have' goals for each organisation to contribute to sustainability and make a credible contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We urge VinylPlus, its member organisations and its stakeholders to acknowledge the "line in the sand" we need to reach and to work together to address the sustainable performance gap.

## The Path Ahead

Looking forward, and as noted in previous commentaries, we believe VinylPlus should continue to make progress across all of the five sustainability commitments. In particular, we suggest there be a strong focus on developing the industry's contribution to the circular economy, ensuring that PVC additives are assessed against a credible and holistic set of criteria and promoting the uptake of labelled products that set the performance benchmark and deliver a clear signal to the market.



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<sup>69</sup> See special issue of Journal of Cleaner Production and in particular Broman, G.I. and Robèrt, K.H., 2017. A framework for strategic sustainable development. Journal of Cleaner Production, 140, pp.17-31. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09596526/140/part/P1>.

<sup>70</sup> See <http://futurefitbusiness.org>