

Stepping up on climate action – How can book sector associations support businesses in reducing CO₂ emissions?¹

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Abstract. Borsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels is the German publishers and booksellers association. Sustainability and working towards achieving the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are top priorities for the organization. This includes the aim of reducing carbon emissions. Borsenverein is a member of the International Publishers Association, the Federation of European Publishers and the European and International Booksellers Federation as well as a corresponding member of STM and collaborates with all these associations in its work on sustainability. At the domestic level, Borsenverein has established a Sustainability Working Group with three task forces to lead its efforts, focusing on promoting the book sector’s achievement of selected SDGs, such as SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). At the same time, the book sector has an outstanding role and opportunity in promoting other SDGs through the works it publishes, distributes, and makes accessible to readers. Borsenverein strives to foster the positive impacts of this “carbon handprint” on SDGs such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Concrete first steps include an external sustainability audit, member-facing events, and a conference.

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1. Introduction

Borsenverein, the German publishers and booksellers association, ranks its SDG [1] strategy among its top priorities. Our Managing Director Peter Kraus vom Cleff has been in post since January 2022, and one of his first initiatives was to install a Head of Sustainability and define a clear focus for our work in this area. It goes without saying that the reduction of carbon emissions is one of the most urgent questions we need to address as an organization and as a sector. I will describe what we as an association are doing, and how we are joining forces internationally to support businesses to tackle the challenges we face.

2. Collaboration across borders

Borsenverein is a member of a number of umbrella organisations, the International Publishers Association (IPA), the Federation of European Publishers (FEP), and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF); and is a corresponding member of STM. We aim to work closely with these partners as

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well as our colleagues in publisher and bookseller associations all over the world to promote our common goals, including sustainability.

I would like to outline some of the activities that are ongoing within this network. IPA has established a Sustainability working group within its Inclusive Publishing and Literacy Committee, which is chaired by Michiel Kolman, former IPA President.

One of IPA's first steps was to establish the SDG Book Club [2] which then gathered other organisations from the book sector to offer one reading list of children's books on each of the Sustainable Development Goals in all six official UN languages. It was launched in 2019 and focused on one SDG and its reading list per month, aimed at 6- to 12-year-old readers. Several local chapters of the SDG Book Club have followed, among them Norway, Indonesia, Brazil, an African Chapter, Portugal, and the one in Germany, which was developed by Borsenverein in collaboration with local partners, including teachers, librarians, and parents. Of course, SDG 13, Climate Action, is one of the most important topics of interest to young readers.

Following the success of that initiative, the IPA and the UN jointly established the SDG Publishers Compact [3], a set of commitments that businesses can sign up to in order to accelerate progress on achieving the SDGs. At the time of its launch in 2020, my organization Borsenverein, along with Frankfurt Book Fair, was among the initial signatories [4].

IPA's Sustainability Summit format was established at Frankfurt Book Fair in 2022 with the aim of taking the conversation around sustainability in the sector from the exchange of ideas to concrete action. Among other innovation initiatives, the event has seen the presentation of a carbon label prototype that publishers can attach to their books in order to make the carbon impact of the product immediately visible to consumers [5]. More pilots are in the works for 2023.

The Federation of European publishers established its Sustainability Working Group in September 2022 as a forum for members to discuss challenges faced by businesses and share information about initiatives and solutions developing throughout the sector. The group is supported by FEP staff who follow policy developments such as e.g. the draft EU Regulation on Deforestation-free products [6] closely, helping the book sector to turn the new requirements into meaningful outcomes on the ground. Besides sharing best practices, the group aims to eventually help shape the book sector's communications on questions of sustainability.

As a member of the European & International Booksellers Federation, Borsenverein benefits from a host of activities under the RISE project. RISE Bookselling is the acronym for a programme co-funded by the EU titled "Resilience, Innovation and Sustainability for the Enhancement of Bookselling" [7]. One of two major studies being conducted within this framework focuses on sustainability within bookselling and will provide practical and useful guidance for booksellers in their transition to more environmentally conscious ways of operating their bookshops. A large part of the necessary transition will involve the reduction of carbon emissions along the value chain.

Another example is the first Industry Insights paper published by EIBF within RISE Bookselling, which analyses the practical handling of returns of books to publishers in seven countries inside and outside Europe. Sharing experiences and knowledge are instrumental to shaping future policies which can help reduce carbon emissions from book logistics.

In March 2023, RISE Bookselling will see the first international Bookselling Conference held in Prague. The programme [8] includes numerous sessions on questions of sustainability, including opportunities for sharing experiences with returns, efforts to make bookshops "greener", and selecting books to help raise awareness of the SDGs among readers. A keynote speech will be delivered by the author Hannah Gold, who writes best-selling books for children about climate emergency.

Finally, STM, the organization representing large and small publishers in Science, Technology and Medicine, has established its SDGs Academic Publishers Forum [9]. The organisation provides advice to members on questions around sustainability and has developed a road map for the achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

From Borsenverein’s point of view, all these actions to counter the global challenge of climate breakdown depend on collaboration and mutual support among our colleagues: publishers and booksellers as well as their associations all over the world. We seek to encourage knowledge sharing and the exchange of ideas and best practices wherever we see the opportunity. IPA’s dedicated website sdg.internationalpublishers.org is an excellent example of this collaborative approach. The site lists initiatives from the book and journal publishing sector which aim to support the SDGs, linking them to the specific SDGs they serve and making them searchable.

3. Collaboration at national level

3.1. Borsenverein’s sustainability mission

In our work at national level within Borsenverein, our first step was to define what sustainability means to us. The vision our members have agreed upon encompasses ecological sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability, three aspects which we view as inextricably linked.

Our Sustainability Working Group [10] was formed in autumn 2022 with a clear focus on ecological sustainability, which we understand as climate action and protection of biodiversity. Its aim is to keep the long-term economic interests of our members in mind when addressing these epochal challenges, in order to safeguard the role of the book sector in serving readers and society at large by promoting a framework that enables the continued economic sustainability of businesses without losing sight of social sustainability.

If we are to achieve measurable results in the face of these challenges of unprecedented magnitude, we will need to prioritize. This includes embarking upon paths that we cannot fully chart at the outset. Given the urgency to act in the face of the climate emergency, it is clear to us that we need to start work without a perfect plan, or even a complete blueprint of all the solutions we are aiming for. This requires us to be flexible and agile in adjusting as we gain knowledge along the way, but also to keep our fundamental principles and overarching goals firmly in view: the SDGs 17.

Borsenverein’s Sustainability Working Group is focusing its activities around promoting the achievement by our sector of selected SDGs, such as SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). At the same time, we recognize that the book sector has an outstanding role and opportunity – and hence a responsibility – in promoting other SDGs through the works our members publish, distribute, and make accessible to readers. We strive to foster the positive impacts of this “carbon handprint” on SDGs such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

3.2. Structuring our work

In order to structure our work, the Sustainability Working Group has established three Task Forces which started work in November 2022. Task Force 1 focuses on production and logistics, aiming to develop ambitious standards for sustainable production and packaging, solutions for the optimization

of dispatch routes, improvements to the practices of dispatching and returns, and quality standards for carbon offsetting, as well as on improving the exchange of experiences about these challenges.

Task Force 2 is looking into the requirements and opportunities around reporting based on “eco-GAAP” [11] and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). The aim of this task force is to provide an overview of the current reporting obligations and to give guidance to reporting companies. With the CSRD, around 15,000 companies in Germany alone will be obliged to prepare a sustainability report (previously, around 500 companies were obliged to report). To ensure that the reports are comparable, uniform standards have been developed in the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS).

The work of Task Force 3 aims to achieve sustainable operations for companies of all sizes in the book sector. Our members include some large corporations, but the majority are SMEs and micro enterprises. As these large and small businesses operate in different roles within the value chain, their needs are highly diverse, as are their opportunities for moving the needle. The concept of sustainable operations covers anything from improved waste management to sustainable incentives for employees, an aspect of the social sustainability which is part of our vision. This task force also aims to prepare our work in communicating about the sustainability efforts of the sector, including consumer-facing communications.

Besides the specific areas of work that our Task Forces are tackling, additional questions are constantly emerging, so we must remain flexible and deploy our resources to meet these new demands as they arise. One example is that we are currently exploring possibilities for partnerships in developing a sector-wide carbon offsetting fund. In line with our mission, we are seeking to ensure that any offsetting adheres to the highest standards of quality and credibility and in no way engage in greenwashing.

3.3. Concrete action

Our first step towards concrete climate action is to set our own house in order. Borsenverein Group is currently undergoing an external sustainability audit based on a materiality analysis. A “materiality analysis” is carried out by companies as part of sustainability management and is a component of CSR communication and, in many cases, the basis of mandatory sustainability reporting. We will have the results by summer and plan to use them to chart a path for our own organization.

In order to reach out to our members, we will be using the opportunity of Leipzig Book Fair, the second-largest book fair in Germany, in April 2023. Our Sustainability Working Group will bring together a panel of experts from the publishing and printing industry who will speak at a public event to help us raise awareness among members and pave the way for more climate action in individual book businesses, highlighting the importance of building a network, exchanging experiences, and exploring synergies which can contribute to our effort going forward.

In June, we will stage the annual conferences of our Sustainability and Digital Transformation Working Groups as a joint event. In times of scarce resources, the necessities of sustainability and digitisation often appear extremely daunting. At our annual conference, we would like to turn the perspective around and look at the opportunities that digital solutions and sustainable strategies provide, especially in times of scarce resources. How can we save time and money with the help of artificial intelligence, for example? Can more digitised processes contribute to greater sustainability? We will stimulate conversations around questions like these, present ideas and discuss possible solutions.

As an association, we are in the business of sharing experiences, results, and expertise with our members at all times, and the subject of climate action is currently one of our highest priorities. It will no doubt remain so over the next months and years.

We are happy to receive feedback or questions and to share experiences with the book sector and beyond. Please contact us with any queries at nachhaltigkeit@boev.de.

References

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