How Collaboration Can Turn Pharma's Sustainability Ambitions Into Action

The pharmaceutical industry faces the challenge of expanding access to life-saving medicines while reducing the environmental impact of discovering, manufacturing, packaging and distributing them. To overcome this challenge, the two goals cannot be treated as competing priorities. Patient health depends on a resilient pharmaceutical system, but that system requires sustainable energy supplies, reliable water resources, functioning infrastructure and healthy communities.

This means that sustainability can no longer be an afterthought within the wider pharmaceutical value chain. Sustainability challenges cannot be solved by a single company, supplier, region or function in isolation. In this article, Silvia Forroova, Director of Partnerships & Sustainability at CPHI and founder of the CPHI Sustainability Collective, explores why collaboration across the pharmaceutical value chain is essential to turning sustainability ambitions into practical action, and where some of the greatest opportunities for progress lie.



This will be discussed further at the upcoming CPHI Sustainability Summit, taking place on day one and two of CPHI Milan, on 6-7 October, 2026. The Summit is a two-day collaborative platform, designed exclusively for pharmaceutical industry professionals committed to accelerating sustainable transformation across the entire value chain, in a discussion-focused event. Find out more about the Summit and ticket registration at cphi.com/europe/sustainability-summit/.

A Global Challenge With Regional Realities

Sustainability challenges are a genuine global concern, but the specific pressures companies face, and the solutions available to them, can vary significantly depending on local conditions. Global organisations need common expectations without assuming that every supplier or manufacturing site starts from the same position. Across different markets, similar challenges emerge as shared priorities for pharmaceutical companies and their supply chain partners:



- **Scope 3 emissions:** Among the most complex universal challenges, Scope 3 emissions lie outside of a pharmaceutical company's direct operations but account for a significant share of its environmental footprint. Meaningful progress depends on broad and sustained supplier engagement.
- **Regulatory fragmentation:** Differing frameworks, reporting expectations and compliance environments are a persistent challenge, particularly for multinational organisations, as they can make it difficult to establish consistent sustainability practices across markets.
- **Supply chain transparency:** Whether sourcing from India, China, Europe or the Americas, companies need greater visibility into supplier practices and environmental performance.

The pathway to overcoming global sustainability challenges varies by geography. Renewable energy availability, water stress, infrastructure, finance, regulation and supplier maturity all influence what is achievable in a specific region or market and how quickly. Europe benefits from relatively established renewable-energy infrastructure, while major Asian manufacturing markets face different transition timelines shaped by scale and national priorities. Emerging pharmaceutical hubs are also investing rapidly in new production capacity, creating opportunities to embed sustainability from the outset. Differences between regions are why a one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to work. Global expectations should provide direction, while implementation reflects regional realities.

Building Sustainable Capabilities Through Global Partnerships

If the industry is to make meaningful progress, sustainability expectations should be clear and matched with the practical support required to meet them. Rather than simply asking suppliers to meet a standard and penalising those that fall short, buyers can help create the conditions for improvement

through technical assistance, knowledge transfer, access to solution providers and longer-term commercial commitments that make investment more viable.

Some sustainability challenges are too broad and systemic for individual companies to tackle effectively on their own, making industry-wide collaboration essential to meaningful progress. Shared environmental standards can provide a common direction for the industry, while collective investment in areas such as infrastructure, supplier capability and greener manufacturing methods can remove barriers that no single company could address as effectively alone. Setting boundaries between collaboration and market competition is an effective way to address sustainability challenges. Industry-wide issues, such as infrastructure, standards and foundational research, are areas where shared solutions can accelerate progress. Companies can still differentiate through implementation excellence, customer-specific solutions and proprietary innovation.

Concerns around intellectual property, commercially sensitive data, antitrust rules and cost-sharing can all limit how openly organisations work together, particularly where the commercial benefits of sustainability investments are unevenly distributed. Neutral industry forums can help overcome some of these barriers by giving customers, suppliers, manufacturers and solution providers a space to discuss shared challenges and identify practical areas for cooperation. The real measure of success is whether those discussions lead to sustained action and measurable progress.

Delivering on Sustainability Commitments

The pharmaceutical sector has made ambitious sustainability commitments, but there is still a gap between targets and implementation. This can be illustrated by using Scope 3 emissions as an example. A company may have a credible net-zero ambition, but delivery requires engagement across a broad supplier network over many years. Circular economy commitments face a similar challenge, with recyclability and waste-reduction goals more common than genuinely closed-loop systems. Organisations that successfully move beyond ambition and pilot projects tend to share several characteristics:

- **Executive accountability:** When sustainability is a business priority and environmental metrics influence leadership decisions, investment and performance expectations, these metrics are more likely to shape day-to-day choices.
- **Cross-functional integration:** Sustainability is impacted by sourcing, development and manufacturing choices. Embedding sustainability in procurement, R&D and operations rather than leaving it with one specialist team helps make the most consequential environmental choices.
- **Supplier partnerships:** Joint innovation, shared targets and regular dialogue can help suppliers build capability while giving buyers greater visibility into practical barriers and moving engagement beyond compliance audits.
- **Transparent reporting:** Communicating progress, including setbacks, creates accountability and helps maintain momentum and highlights where further intervention is needed.
- **Dedicated resources:** Without skilled practitioners, clear ownership and sufficient budgets, sustainability targets are unlikely to translate into sustained change.

Industry collaboration and productive forums should create tangible outputs such as working groups, shared frameworks, specific commitments and progress measures. Knowledge exchange matters, but continuity and peer accountability are what turn discussion into momentum.

Green Chemistry as a Practical High-Impact Opportunity

Green active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) manufacturing is an opportunity to make tangible sustainability gains. Solvent selection and recovery are particularly important because solvents account for a large proportion of pharmaceutical synthesis waste. Although moving towards greener solvents and improving recovery can create substantial environmental benefits, translating these technical opportunities into widespread commercial adoption remains a significant challenge. Changing an established API process can require revalidation, resubmission of regulatory filings, capital investment and technical risk.

Wider adoption will depend on reducing this friction while strengthening alignment between pharmaceutical companies, raw-material suppliers and outsourcing partners, such as contract development and manufacturing organisations (CDMOs). Greater regulatory clarity around sustainability-driven process changes would help, as would industry collaboration that enables organisations to share lessons from successful green chemistry scale-ups without surrendering proprietary advantage. Financial incentives or preferential procurement for more sustainably manufactured APIs could also strengthen the investment case for green chemistry.

Sustainable Packaging Innovation That Maintains Product Safety

Pharmaceutical packaging presents another major opportunity, but also one of the clearest tensions between environmental ambition and patient protection. Any change must continue to meet non-negotiable requirements around safety, stability, sterility, usability, regulatory compliance and anti-counterfeiting. Within those constraints, several areas offer meaningful potential:

- **Material innovation:** Mono-material solutions and pulp-based fibre alternatives may reduce reliance on difficult-to-recycle multi-layer combinations where product requirements allow. Biodegradable or compostable materials may also have a role in suitable applications.
- **Design optimisation:** Packaging can be optimised without compromising performance. Thinner but stronger films can lower material consumption, modular formats can make components easier to separate and digital patient-information portals may reduce dependence on paper inserts where appropriate.
- **Circular models:** Closed-loop recycling partnerships can address what happens after use. Materials can re-enter



the supply chain and post-consumer recycled content can reduce demand for virgin materials where regulations permit.

Packaging innovation should account for environmental impact alongside the industry's existing requirements for safety and performance. Lifecycle analysis can help assess impacts across production, use and disposal, while early regulatory engagement can clarify which sustainability-driven changes are both feasible and compliant.

Supplier Collaboration as a Source of Resilience

Supplier engagement is essential to improving environmental performance across the pharmaceutical value chain, while also helping to build stronger, more resilient commercial relationships. Questionnaires and periodic audits are standard approaches to assessing sustainability performance within partnerships. A mature buyer-supplier relationship goes beyond this with long-term commitments and joint goal-setting, built on regular communication. Multi-year contracts can give suppliers greater confidence to invest in new equipment or processes, while technical assistance and knowledge transfer can help close capability gaps.

On the commercial side, sustainability programmes can improve supply-chain resilience, reduce costs through efficiency, support market access, mitigate regulatory and reputational risks and unlock supplier innovation. Deeper supplier collaboration is also the only credible route to meaningful Scope 3 reductions. When suppliers improve their own practices and influence their suppliers in turn, capability-building extends beyond a single commercial relationship.

Measuring Value Beyond Short-Term Savings

Beyond immediate cost reduction, sustainability investment can support commercial performance, reduce exposure to future risks and strengthen the organisation over the longer term. Leaders should consider a broad range of strategic outcomes:

- **Commercial value:** Sustainability initiatives can bring stronger market access, product differentiation and new market opportunities. As customer expectations evolve, sustainability performance can influence purchasing decisions and competitive positioning.
- **Risk and resilience:** Stronger supply continuity and reduced exposure to regulatory or reputational disruption reduce risk and build resilience. Scenario analysis can help demonstrate the potential cost of inaction compared with proactive investment.
- **Organisational value:** Improved sustainability performance can provide access to capital, stronger investor relations and improved talent attraction and retention. Sustainability can also drive process innovation and encourage more efficient ways of operating.

The most persuasive investment cases combine quantitative evidence with strategic narrative. Peer benchmarking, pilot results and market research can demonstrate commercial relevance, while regulatory trajectory, stakeholder expectations and risk assessment explain why delaying action may create greater costs later.

A Shared Opportunity for the Industry

For collaboration to drive meaningful change, sustainability efforts need to reflect the realities of the entire pharmaceutical value chain. That means recognising that companies operate with very different levels of resources, infrastructure and technical capability, and ensuring that smaller organisations and suppliers in emerging markets are not excluded from progress. More consistent approaches to measurement and reporting could also help create a clearer basis for comparison, making it easier to identify what works and where further support is needed. Building that inclusivity and consistency into industry-wide efforts will be essential if sustainability ambitions are to translate into practical change at scale.

Industry forums and neutral collaboration platforms have an important role to play in bringing different parts of the pharmaceutical value chain together, creating space to share practical experience, build trust and identify areas where joint action can accelerate progress. Their value is greatest when those conversations continue beyond the event itself, through working groups, shared commitments and clear measures of progress. In this way, forums can help turn individual sustainability efforts into more coordinated, industry-wide action.

The future of pharma depends on our ability to deliver life-saving medicines while protecting the sustainability of our planet. That future will be built through partnerships across companies, functions, suppliers, regions and the wider ecosystem and not in isolation.

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