

Briefing for UNDP Senior Management: Communicating to Donor and Recipient Governments about UNDP's Social and Environmental Standards and Accountability Mechanism

This briefing highlights key components of UNDP's Social and Environmental Standards (SES) and Accountability Mechanism, and provides discussion points for Senior Managers and other UNDP staff to help recipient and donor governments better understand and integrate them into UNDP projects and programmes.

UNDP has established the Social and Environmental Standards (SES) and Accountability Mechanism as a key element of quality assurance; a demonstration of UNDP's commitment to the highest standards of transparency, accountability and sustainability in response to growing demand from external stakeholders; and a means to enhance the capacities of governments and other Implementing Partners to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The true test of the effectiveness of the SES and Accountability Mechanism will be in their implementation on the ground. Senior Managers at all levels have a critical role to play in

- **raising awareness among recipient and donor governments of the SES and Accountability Mechanism;**
- **strengthening capacities at the country level to implement and mainstream the SES;**
- **working with Implementing Partners to inform stakeholders of the SES and their options for accessing the Accountability Mechanism.**

BACKGROUND

UNDP's [Social and Environmental Standards](#) (SES) came into effect 1 January 2015. The objectives of the standards are to:

- Strengthen the social and environmental outcomes of programmes and projects
- Avoid adverse impacts to people and the environment
- Minimize, mitigate, and manage adverse impacts where avoidance is not possible
- Strengthen UNDP and partner capacities for managing social and environmental risks
- Ensure full and effective stakeholder engagement, including through a mechanism to respond to complaints from project-affected people

The **SES** center on the UN's **THREE NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES** for common country programming – (1) human rights, (2) gender equality and women's empowerment, and (3) environmental sustainability – which apply across all UNDP programmes and projects. The following **7 STANDARDS** are applied at the project level:

- Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management
- Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation
- Community Health, Safety and Working Conditions
- Cultural Heritage

- Displacement and Resettlement
- Indigenous Peoples
- Pollution Prevention and Resource Efficiency

At the project level, the Standards are primarily applied through the [Social and Environmental Screening Procedure](#) (SESP), which is required for proposed or substantially revised projects. The SESP is an essential quality assurance and risk management tool that ensures the SES are translated into practice. Applied from the earliest stages of project preparation, the SESP guides UNDP and its Implementing Partners in designing projects and systems that ensure social and environmental impacts are properly identified and managed.

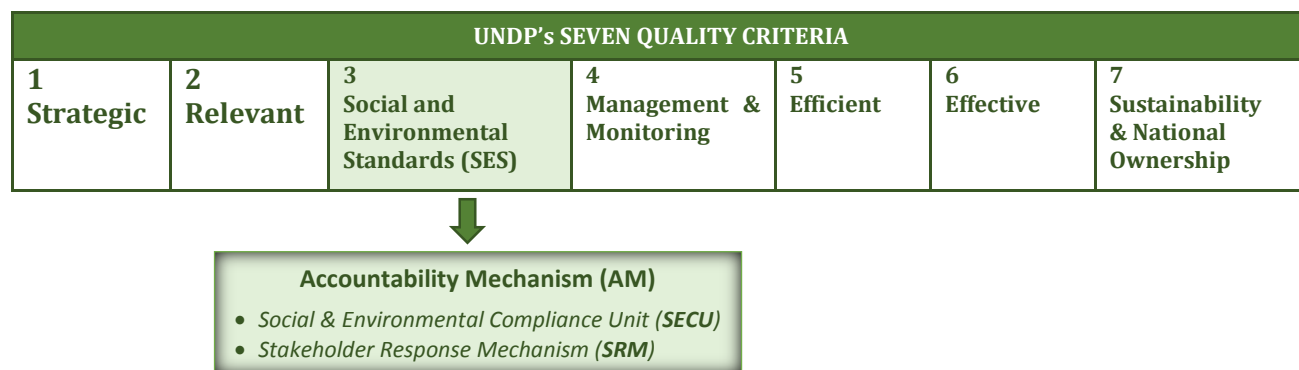
The Standards are underpinned by an [Accountability Mechanism](#) with two key functions: 1) A [Stakeholder Response Mechanism](#) (SRM); and 2) A [Compliance Review](#) Process.

- The **Stakeholder Response Mechanism** offers locally affected people an opportunity to work with other stakeholders to resolve concerns about the social and environmental impacts of a UNDP project, supplementing the proactive stakeholder engagement that is required of UNDP and its Implementing Partners throughout the project cycle.
- The **Social and Environmental Compliance Unit** investigates allegations that UNDP's Standards, screening procedure or other UNDP social and environmental commitments are not being implemented adequately, and that harm may result to people or the environment. SECU is mandated to independently and impartially investigate valid requests from locally impacted people, and to report its findings and recommendations publicly.

MESSAGING AND TALKING POINTS

- **Citizens, business leaders and stakeholder groups are demanding higher levels of engagement and accountability from governments**, especially where government-sponsored projects and programmes may pose risks to people and their environments. This expectation stems in part from increased global connectivity and a growing focus on improving inefficient or harmful practices and systems of the past.
- **Establishing a credible, transparent and effective approach to social and environmental sustainability and accountability, built on international norms and best practice, is a foundation of good governance, and it makes good business sense.** Dedicated UNDP staff in every Country Office, and across Regional Bureaus, translates into crucial support to national partners for accomplishing their own development agendas, and for meeting their commitment to the SDGs.
- **UNDP's launch of the SES is based on a recognition that opportunities to strengthen the social and environmental sustainability of development interventions and respond to and manage potential risks needs to begin as early as possible in the planning process. It also recognizes that even with good planning, unanticipated impacts and conflict may still arise.** Recipient governments need mechanisms in place to identify and manage those impacts, and to resolve complaints that may be associated with UNDP programming. Donor governments need assurance that recipients are establishing strong social and environmental protections. **This is a win-win for people and the environment and fundamental to sustainable development.**

- **UNDP’s Strategic Plan** (2014-2017) states that “programmes and projects will adhere to uniform quality standards and processes for which managers will be accountable.” The Programming **Quality Assurance (QA)** system is the primary UNDP monitoring tool to deliver on this Strategic Plan commitment. The SES are a core component of QA and are embedded in the seven “quality criteria” that form the bases of the QA System and the two functions of the Accountability Mechanism:



- The Standards define in clear and concrete terms what UNDP stands for, in line with our mandate and the UN’s normative framework. The SES are a mechanism through which UNDP and its partners can fulfill – consistently across all UNDP development programming – **the UN Development Group’s (UNDG) three normative principles** of Human Rights, Gender Equality, and Environmental Sustainability.
- Given that the UNDG principles are at the heart of our Standards, and with other UN agencies also in the process of adopting similar policies, UNDP’s Standards offer substantive content and a potential means of improving how we **‘Deliver as One’ at the country level**.
- The SES and Accountability Mechanism are part and parcel of UNDP’s **proactive approach to project risk assessment and management**. In a development environment with increasing levels of risk, impact, conflict and resource constraints, it is imperative that strong policies and safeguards are in place to prevent or mitigate harm to people and their environments. The SES are UNDP’s response to that imperative.
- UNDP’s Stakeholder Response Mechanism and Social and Environmental Compliance Unit are **outward-facing accountability tools** for project-affected people and stakeholders to engage with us. Successful implementation of this Accountability Mechanism is critical to UNDP’s efforts to improve **transparency, openness and accessibility** across all operations.
- What sets UNDP Standards apart from those of the IFIs and MDBs is that our Standards reflect UNDP’s and the UN’s commitment to **support country partners to implement their duties and obligations under international conventions and agreements, including human rights and international environmental agreements**.
- **The Standards offer recipient and donor governments an operational mechanism for delivering on their commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. Integral to the SDGs, the SES and accountability functions underpin the UN’s far-reaching and people-centered agenda to end poverty and hunger; combat inequality; build peaceful, just and inclusive

societies; protect human rights and promote gender equality; and ensure conservation of the world's natural resources for future generations.

- Linked to UNDP's corporate SES and Accountability Mechanism, UNDP also offers countries support in strengthening and establishing national level safeguard systems and grievance mechanisms. **Robust project- and country-level safeguards and grievance systems help reduce the risk of conflict; and build confidence and trust among stakeholders.**
- **Access to new sources of financing** (e.g. Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility, Adaptation Fund, etc.) is increasingly tied to social and environmental safeguard policies and accountability mechanisms. Having such policies in place can also translate into **increased international recognition and reputational value** for both UNDP and for national implementing entities.

ENTRY POINTS FOR DISCUSSING UNDP'S SES AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM WITH PARTNER GOVERNMENTS

UNDP staff at country and regional levels have been taking the opportunity to engage with government counterparts in the following contexts:

- **Design of a new project document or substantive changes to an existing project**, for example by jointly completing the Social and Environmental Screening Procedure (SESP), while noting the new Project Document Template will soon include language on the new SES, SRM and SECU.
- **In particular, design of a project proposal for the Green Climate Fund, Green Climate Fund and/or Forest Carbon Partnership Facility**, noting that these funding sources require application of social and environmental safeguards.
- **Design of a new Country Programme Document (CPD)**, noting that the new CPD Template includes language related to the need to apply social and environmental standards.
- **Design of a new UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF)**, noting that the SES are a mechanism through which UNDP and its partners can fulfill – consistently across all UNDP activities – the UN Development Group's (UNDG) three normative principles of Human Rights, Gender Equality, and Environmental Sustainability.
- Discussions about **a high-risk project or sectoral portfolio**, to offer UNDP's support in mitigating social and environmental impacts and risk of conflict.
- Supporting an implementing partner **respond to concerns and grievances** from project affected stakeholders about the social and/or environmental impacts of a project.
- **Design of a joint communication plan** to ensure project stakeholders are aware of UNDP's SES, SRM and SECU.

COMMUNICATION MATERIALS

- [Flyer on the SES and Accountability Mechanism](#)
- [SECU & SRM Brochure](#) to share with recipient governments and development partners (can request a printed version at stakeholder.response@undp.org)

KEY ONLINE RESOURCES THAT CAN BE SHARED WITH PARTNERS (Available in Spanish, French and English)

- [Social and Environmental Standards \(SES\)](#)– Policy document that covers all Programmes and Projects
- [Social and Environmental Screening Procedure \(SESP\)](#) – Project-level screening procedure for proposed projects or those that have undergone a substantive revision
- [Stakeholder Response Mechanism \(SRM\) Overview and Guidance](#) – A guide to the SRM for stakeholders who believe a UNDP project may have adverse social or environmental impacts.
- [Social and Environmental Compliance Unit \(SECU\) Investigation Guidelines](#) – A guide to SECU's procedural process for UNDP staff, implementing partners, and stakeholders with concerns about a UNDP project's compliance with the SES.
- [Form for Submitting a SECU/SRM Request](#) – For stakeholders who believe UNDP is not complying with its social or environmental policies or commitments and being harmed as a result.
- [Mailing List](#) – Join this list to provide feedback, get news and updates about the SES and Accountability Mechanism, and learn about outreach and learning opportunities.
- [SES Website](#)
- [SECU and SRM Website](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR UNDP SENIOR MANAGERS

- [SES Toolkit](#) – Comprehensive guidance for UNDP staff on navigating requirements of the SES (currently accessible only to UNDP staff but will be made public in 2016)

Social and Environmental Standards

The **SES** center on the UN's **THREE NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES** for common country programming – (1) human rights, (2) gender equality and women's empowerment, and (3) environmental sustainability – which apply across all programmes and projects. The following **7 STANDARDS** apply at the project level:

1) Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management	<i>Maintain and enhance the goods and services provided by biodiversity and ecosystems.</i>
2) Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation	<i>Ensure UNDP projects are sensitive to climate change risks and do not contribute to increased vulnerability.</i>
3) Community Health, Safety and Working Conditions	<i>Avoid or minimize risks and impacts to community health and safety, with particular attention to marginalized groups.</i>
4) Cultural Heritage	<i>Ensure that Cultural Heritage is protected in the course of development activities.</i>
5) Displacement and Resettlement	<i>Avoid physical and economic displacement in UNDP projects.</i>
6) Indigenous Peoples	<i>Promote and protect indigenous people's rights – especially concerning their lands, territories, traditional livelihoods, cultures and resources.</i>
7) Pollution Prevention and Resource Efficiency	<i>Meet international standards for preventing pollution and using resources efficiently.</i>

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM

SECU	SRM
<p>The Social and Environmental Compliance Unit investigates allegations that UNDP's Standards, screening procedure or other UNDP social and environmental commitments are not being implemented adequately, and that harm may result to people or the environment. SECU is housed in the Office of Audit and Investigations (OAI), and managed by a Lead Compliance Officer.</p> <p>A compliance review is available to any community or individual with concerns about the impacts of a UNDP programme or project. SECU is mandated to independently and impartially investigate valid requests from locally impacted people, and to report its findings and recommendations publicly.</p> <p>Compliance reviews may also be initiated by the UNDP Administrator and the Lead Compliance Officer.</p>	<p>The Stakeholder Response Mechanism offers locally affected people an opportunity to work with other stakeholders to resolve concerns about the social and environmental impacts of a UNDP project.</p> <p>SRM is intended to supplement the proactive stakeholder engagement that is required of UNDP and its Implementing Partners throughout the project cycle. Communities and individuals may request an SRM process when they have used standard channels for project management and quality assurance, and are not satisfied with the response.</p> <p>When a valid SRM request is submitted, UNDP focal points at country, regional and headquarters levels will work with concerned stakeholders and Implementing Partners to address and resolve the concerns.</p>
<p>STAKEHOLDERS HAVE A CHOICE: Groups or individuals who believe UNDP projects may not be complying with the SES can ask SECU to investigate UNDP's compliance with its social and environmental commitments; they can request assistance in resolving the issue through the SRM; or they can request both a SECU review AND an SRM process.</p>	

ANNEX 1. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do the SES relate to national systems, particularly in nationally implemented projects?

UNDP's responsibility is to ensure compliance with our policies and procedures, including the SES, on projects that it supports, even when the project is nationally implemented. In such cases, UNDP is still accountable to our Board and accountable to applying the principles of the UN that are embodied in the SES. In cases where the Implementing Partner has their own social and environmental standards or safeguards in place (e.g. in the form of a policy, law or regulation), these should be applied in the project to demonstrate compliance with UNDP's SES to the extent possible. If there are inconsistencies or gaps, the highest standard should be applied and additional measures to address any gaps should be incorporated into the project design. The SES do not introduce "conditionalities" on countries to have in place their own standards that are equivalent to that of UNDP's, rather they ensure that UNDP remains accountable to the principles of the UN through the design and implementation of our programming with partners.

How does UNDP's SRM relate to national dispute resolution processes?

When UNDP projects are implemented by national governments or other Implementing Partners, and issues are raised that stakeholders would like to solve through a collaborative process, e.g., mediation, the presumption is that the grievance mechanism of the Implementing Partner will be the first avenue for resolving these issues. This is true whether the mechanism is specific to the project, or a pre-existing mechanism of the Implementing Partner (for example, a ministry complaints office or a national government ombudsman office). A second avenue for resolution of such issues is the UNDP Country Offices' existing project management procedures. The Stakeholder Response Mechanism is meant to supplement Implementing Partner mechanisms and UNDP project management, not replace them. When Implementing Partner mechanisms and UNDP project management do not produce responses that satisfy concerned stakeholders, they may opt to use the SRM to resolve their issue through a collaborative process. CO staff (and potentially regional and HQ counterparts) responsible for the SRM will normally seek opportunities to share process management responsibility with existing national grievance mechanisms or dispute resolution programs.

How do the SES apply in cases of co-financing?

Many UNDP projects include co-financing which is not managed by UNDP. To ensure compliance with the SES requirements for all projects implemented with funds channeled through UNDP accounts, UNDP must review not only its own portion of the project for potential social and environmental risks, but also project activities funded through other partners. In the event UNDP identifies inconsistencies or non-compliances with the SES, it engages other project partners on strategies to ensure UNDP complies with the SES for its portion of the project. In short, UNDP will need to work closely with all partners to ensure that the project is consistent with the SES.

How do UNDP's SES and Accountability Mechanism (AM) compare to others?

UNDP's SES and AM are based on globally agreed social and environmental standards and norms, and on UNDP's corporate commitment to environmental and social sustainability, stakeholder engagement and grievance resolution. They also reflect best practice in social and environmental standard setting, implementation and grievance resolution among multilateral development institutions. The SES are substantially equivalent to those at the Multilateral Development Banks and other UN system principles and commitments (including the GCF and GEF safeguards), while also reflecting UNDP's specific commitments. While there are some differences among them, there is now overwhelming convergence of social and

environmental standards. What sets UNDP's Standards apart from those of the IFIs and MDBs is that they reflect UNDP's and the UN's commitment to support country partners to implement their duties and obligations under international conventions and agreements, including human rights and international environmental agreements. The AM also draws on previous experiences of international institutions, with procedural innovations to more effectively meet the dual needs of concerned communities and the needs of UNDP and its development partners to implement the highest-quality projects. The comprehensive and multi-layered structures of the AM bring a new sophistication to the basic principles of accountability common to most development institutions.

How is the UN system coordinating on social and environmental standards to ensure a common UN approach at the country level?

While there is currently not a One UN approach to social and environmental standards, UNDP's SES are based on the three normative principles for common country programming in the UN: human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability. This is to ensure a common basis at the country level in the spirit of Delivering as One. UNDP's SES and AM therefore offer a basis that other parts of the system can apply and adopt at the country level. Several UN agencies are currently developing or rolling-out their own standards so this may become a challenge at the country level that will need to be addressed. UNDP is a recognized leader in the UN system in putting in place such standards and a related accountability mechanism through a rigorous and consultative process so UNDP can also demonstrate this leadership at the country level.

What is the government's role in promoting the SES and Accountability Mechanism?

As UNDP and governments prepare to undertake a UNDP project, they must work closely with project affected communities to identify potential social and environmental impacts and raise awareness of the SES and AM. By systematically assessing risks in project conceptualization, design and appraisal, and by ensuring that all project partners and stakeholders are familiar with the SES, UNDP and governments can better anticipate potential adverse impacts and grievances and develop appropriate management measures. As active proponents of the SES, for example, governments will be well positioned to strengthen and clarify the role of a Project Board or Steering Committee as a project-level grievance mechanism, or undertake activities that strengthen their own national procedures for grievance resolution. The public release of all relevant documentation about the project and how it might impact a community is an essential function for government and project implementers. Obtaining community input about a project is only possible if stakeholders are aware of the project, its sponsors, and potential social and environmental impacts.

How can UNDP provide support to strengthen national safeguard systems and accountability mechanisms?

UNDP is well-placed to provide support and capacity development to our partners to ensure that safeguards and grievance mechanisms are in place, particularly for sectors or interventions that are higher risk. We have a track record of providing this type of support to countries, including through: assessment and strengthening of relevant policies, laws and regulations; strengthening of capacities for implementation and monitoring of safeguards; stakeholder engagement and dialogue; assessment of strengths and gaps related to national and/or sectoral grievance mechanisms; and strengthening these grievance mechanisms by enhancing transparency, accessibility, credibility, and the capacities of local and national institutions, *inter alia*. Through UNDP's ongoing work supporting national safeguard systems for REDD+, UNDP has a package of tools and lessons-learned that can be adapted and applied through other programmes and projects.