

Review of the ISEAL Credibility Principles 2019

In 2013, ISEAL launched the *Principles for Credible and Effective Sustainability Standards Systems* (Credibility Principles) – a set of core principles that provide an international reference for defining the foundations of credible practices for sustainability standards. They are a means for communicating the core values that lie behind credible standards and have also served as a reference point for interpreting ISEAL’s Codes and for framing the desired outcomes of Code requirements. The Credibility Principles were developed through an extensive global consultation with the guidance of an international multi-stakeholder Steering Committee.

This year ISEAL launched a review of the Credibility Principles to find out how the principles have been used and adopted. Through the review, ISEAL will research and get input on the scope, objectives, stakeholder landscape, trends, consistency and usability affecting the principles. ISEAL will also explore how best to present and communicate the principles to meet stakeholder needs. The current terms of reference are in Annex 1.

The outcome of the review will decide whether the Credibility Principles need to be revised to adapt to new international frameworks and norms, changing stakeholder expectations or innovations in sustainability tools, and, if so, the scope of the revision. If a decision is made to revise the Credibility Principles, the revision will take place in 2020.

Review questions

Through the review process, we will answer the following questions:

Continued relevance of the Credibility Principles themselves:

- Do the Credibility Principles themselves still resonate? Is anything missing or superfluous when considering what standards systems’ key stakeholders think is critical to credibility today? Or when considering different market contexts or sectors?
- How do the Credibility Principles compare to new international, stakeholder, and/or researcher frameworks for gauging the credibility of sustainability tools? With growing acceptance of some international frameworks, does it still add value to develop credibility principles specifically for sustainability standards and tools?

Use of the Credibility Principles:

- How have the Credibility Principles been used over the past six years, and by whom? Were the Credibility Principles and their presentation fit for purpose?
- How would stakeholders like to use the Credibility Principles in the future, and what would it take to have them serve that purpose?
- Do the Credibility Principles apply equally well to a broader suite of sustainability tools, beyond standards? If not, why not? Are they relevant, for example, for improvement programs, for landscape systems?

- How well has it worked for ISEAL to use the Credibility Principles to inform ISEAL’s messaging, our Codes of Good Practice, and our membership requirements?

Theory of change

- How do the Credibility Principles fit into ISEAL’s evolving theory of change?
- Are the current objectives for the Credibility Principles clear and relevant to users’ needs?

Ownership and legitimacy

- What do stakeholders feel would be needed to raise the profile of and build greater support for the Credibility Principles?
- Do existing international principles underlie the Credibility Principles, and, if so, which ones?

Review process

The review process began in March 2019 and will run through December 2019, culminating with a recommendation to the ISEAL Board about whether to revise the Credibility Principles and/or what other work with the Credibility Principles may be necessary to help them achieve their objective into the future.

The ISEAL Secretariat will lead the review process in coordination with ISEAL’s Technical Committee.

If a decision is made to revise the Credibility Principles, then ISEAL’s Technical Committee will recommend a procedure for that revision to ISEAL’s Board.

Review timeline*

Activity	Proposed date
Board meeting to review the intended process and rationale for entering into a review of the Credibility Principles	April 2019
Internal review	May to August 2019
Technical Committee to consider the internal review findings	September 2019
Research conducted on frameworks that do or could establish principles that underlie the Credibility Principles in order to understand them in the current landscape for sustainability standards and other sustainability tools	September 2019
Public consultation to capture stakeholder views on the evolving vision of credibility and a broader application of the Credibility Principles	September to October 2019
Meeting of the Technical Committee to consider review findings, to decide on whether to proceed to revision and the scope of that revision, as well as to propose any changes to the Terms of Reference for the Credibility Principles	November 2019

Board agrees on Terms of Reference for the Credibility Principles and revision plan	December 2019
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** Note that this timeline only covers the review process, and that a timeline for the revision itself would be developed prior to the December Board meeting*

Opportunities for stakeholder involvement in the review process

- Participate in our online consultation (starting mid-September 2019)
- Send us examples of how you are using the Credibility Principles
- Share with us other frameworks or approaches to thinking about the credibility of sustainability tools
- Sign up to our [mailing list](#)
- Share information about the review on social media
- Express your interest in joining a steering group for the revision

Contact

If you are interested in getting involved in the review process or have any questions, contact Eleanor Radford: eleanor@isealalliance.org

Annex 1 – Original Scope, Goals and Objectives for Credibility Principles v1 (2013)

Scope

The ISEAL Credibility Principles apply to all standards systems that focus on sustainability performance and that incorporate a standard and a mechanism for assuring compliance with that standard. The Credibility Principles, therefore, will be applied by the whole standards system, which refers to the collective of organisations involved in and responsible for the activities involved in the implementation of a standard, including standard-setting, capacity building, assurance, labelling and monitoring.

Goals

Sustainability standards are increasing in use and scope, and a wide variety of claims are being made about the environmental and social attributes of products. Stakeholders need to understand what makes standards systems credible, whether they are effective and how to evaluate and support them. It is also essential to develop a tool that provides a common way of organising the language used to claim sustainability in the marketplace.

By clearly defining the fundamental principles in credible standards and categorising the language used to make sustainability claims, we will:

- Ensure products are sourced from producers and enterprises achieving sustainability
- Distinguish good practice from good marketing
- Avoid greenwashing

Objectives

The ISEAL Credibility Principles can serve a number of complementary functions:

- Provide an aspirational framework for standards systems to improve their knowledge and, thus, their ability to deliver sustainability improvements
- Aid users of standards systems (such as producers, procurement officials, companies, NGOs, and financiers) in determining the relative credibility and effectiveness of the standards systems with which they are engaging
- Provide a powerful communications tool that will build greater stakeholder understanding of what makes a credible and effective standard
- Inform sourcing decisions that favour entities that comply with credible and effective sustainability standards
- Distinguish good practice from good marketing – ensure standards systems and users are accountable for the claims they make, and that claims are backed up by substance

What are we trying to achieve?

- **A globally agreed set of Credibility Principles that will be an international reference:** ISEAL aims to achieve consensus on Credibility Principles that will become the global reference for discussions centred on credibility in sustainability standards. This will also include a complementary tool that describes and categorises sustainability claims in the market.

- **A tool that improves effectiveness:** The Credibility Principles will inform good practice and improve the effectiveness of standard systems in achieving positive social and environmental impacts. If stakeholders agree on what credibility looks like, this will push sustainability standards to adopt good practice. ISEAL's *Codes of Good Practice* will emphasise the Credibility Principles and provide more guidance for standards to implement them.

How will this build on existing work?

Conversations have been increasing about what is required to produce and run a credible standards system, and some documents have circulated on the subject. ISEAL has created a set of draft Credibility Principles as well. To ensure clear, accessible documents that have global consensus ISEAL will draw from a variety of existing sources for this work.

ISEAL is leading this conversation because of its experience in facilitating a deeper understanding of how to improve sustainability standards. The Credibility Principles will capture our collective knowledge of the concepts and actions that are critical to the effectiveness of sustainability standards, build on ISEAL's *Codes of Good Practice* and guide ISEAL in considering what additional tools or Codes are needed.