ISEAL Code of Good Practice: consultation workshop summary

December 2023

Background

ISEAL’s Codes of Good Practice provide a globally recognised framework, defining practices for effective and credible sustainability standards and similar systems. The ISEAL Impacts, Standard-Setting, and Assurance Codes of Good Practice, along with essential practices from the ISEAL Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide, have been integrated into the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems (the ISEAL Code).

Producers are a key stakeholder group that will be affected by changes made in the ISEAL Code, particularly where requirements would impact how sustainability systems interact with and affect producers. We solicited feedback from this stakeholder group on the direction of the draft ISEAL Code through the consultation process.

We partnered with Proforest to conduct an in-person workshop in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 16 August 2023. Though the workshop was shortly after the official close of the second round of public consultation, feedback was incorporated into the review and revision of the consultation comments. The workshop was attended by 21 representatives of production level stakeholders, representing 14 organisations. They represented organisations working with a broad range of sustainability systems, including some ISEAL Community Members.

The feedback from the workshop was cross-referenced against the existing draft of the ISEAL Code to identify where there were opportunities to integrate learnings. Where comments were relevant to the content of the ISEAL Code, they were included within the comment log for the second round of consultation. Where comments were outside the scope of the ISEAL Code, these have been noted as general learnings to inform future work involving production level stakeholders. This document summaries key learnings from the workshop and how they were used to inform development of the ISEAL Code.

General learnings about production-level stakeholder priorities

The workshop focused on the points in which sustainability systems have the most direct impact and engagement with production-level stakeholders. This included how sustainability systems:

- keep stakeholders informed of changes
- ensure stakeholders perspectives are accounted for when making decisions
- enable stakeholders to raise concerns and provide feedback
- ensure those engaging with the sustainability system derive value

Key reflections for each of these topics are summarised below.
How sustainability systems keep stakeholders informed of changes

Feedback from the workshop highlighted that to varying extents, the ISEAL Code already addressed challenges that producers encounter in this space. This included:

- lack of information due to poor document control (e.g., dates of recent review or revisions)
  \(\text{The ISEAL Code includes clauses that specify the minimum information to be included in key documents.}\)

- an overreliance on communicating information in an online format
  \(\text{The ISEAL Code requires each sustainability system to define how the changes will be communicated, and does not specify that it should be included on a website. It also ensures that efforts are taken to overcome barriers to participation and engagement by under-engaged and under-represented stakeholder groups.}\)

In response to the feedback raised in the workshop, we adapted phrasing in a clause to reference 'adequate time to comply', to ensure the timeliness of communicating changes.

How sustainability systems take into account stakeholder perspective in decision-making

Feedback highlighted that the ISEAL Code already addressed challenges that producers encounter in this space. This included:

- lack of public consultation
  \(\text{The ISEAL Code ensures that there is at least one round of public consultation during standard review, and at least two rounds of public consultation during standards development. This is supported by clauses that require sufficient awareness raising of public consultations, including informing stakeholders of opportunities to engage and efforts to achieved balanced participation among stakeholder groups.}\)

- inputs from stakeholders can be poorly captured during consultation
  \(\text{The ISEAL Code includes clauses that aim to ensure stakeholders can see what input was received and how it is taken into account.}\)

- lack of balance and diversity in the stakeholders participating in consultation
  \(\text{Gathering input from a balanced and diverse group of stakeholders is included as an aim for public consultation within the ISEAL Code.}\)

There were also a number of recommendations for how sustainability systems can better reflect producer perspectives. In response to a comment noting the importance of translated resources, a clause was edited to highlight the importance of this for accessibility. No other changes were made to the ISEAL Code, either because a similar outcome was already achieved through different means (e.g., clauses that require sustainability systems to identify and proactively seek input from under-represented stakeholders), or because the recommendations were too prescriptive to include within the ISEAL Code (e.g., recommendation to consult at production level and assess the objectivity of the stakeholders providing inputs).

How sustainability systems enable stakeholders to raise concerns and provide feedback

Feedback highlighted that the ISEAL Code already addressed challenges that producers encounter in this space. This included:

- lack of publicly available information about how to contact sustainability systems
  \(\text{The ISEAL Code ensures a wide range of information relevant to support feedback is made publicly available including a contact point for feedback.}\)
lack of clarity on who is relevant to contact within a sustainability system

The ISEAL Code specifies that contact points for each scheme component and related strategies should be made publicly available and easily accessible.

A recommendation on this topic included requiring that sustainability systems actively raise awareness of their dispute resolution process. The existing clause already included requirements that ensure the dispute resolution is easily accessible, and so no further changes were made.

How sustainability systems ensure participants derive value

Feedback highlighted that the ISEAL Code already addressed challenges that producers encounter in this space. This included:

- lack of transparency in how stakeholder input is used to inform changes
  The ISEAL Code ensures information about how inputs were used is documented and publicly available.

- false claims from other users of the sustainability system can limit value to others
  The ISEAL Code introduces clauses that ensure monitoring of claims.

- certain commodities may have many sustainability systems that operate in that context, and it can be overwhelming for producers to choose
  The ISEAL Code recommends that strategy development is informed by reviewing complementarity with sustainability systems with overlapping scopes.

- misleading communications about the value of participation
  The ISEAL Code ensure that claims made about the sustainability system are relevant and accurate.

The feedback also highlighted challenges that were beyond the scope of the ISEAL Code to influence, including the need for greater incentives and benefits of creating discussion forums. There were also suggestions for additional activities that sustainability systems could undertake, which while relevant, were above the level of prescriptiveness possible to include in the ISEAL Code (e.g., promoting cross-learning amongst sustainability systems in terms of potential and tangible benefits that can be provided to stakeholders), but align to the broader scope of peer-learning between ISEAL Community Members.

Other observations

Broader comments that reflected challenges that are beyond the scope of the influence of the ISEAL Code, but that are important to be aware of included:

- There can be the perception from government that voluntary certification is not a suitable tool

- Barriers to implementation can arise due to the local situation e.g. local regulations

Next steps

The workshop provided valuable insights into the priorities and perspectives of production level stakeholders. For a full summary of all comments received during the second consultation, including from this workshop, review the second draft comment log on the Code consultation webpage. We will continue to seek feedback from a range of stakeholders during future review and revision of the ISEAL Code and welcome any feedback in the meantime.

If you have any questions or feedback about this workshop or the public consultation, please contact consultation@isealalliance.org