



## Terms of Reference: Understanding NGO/civil society expectations of sustainability standards and similar systems

February 2023

ISEAL is seeking a consultant to put together a summary of the main critiques and recommendations for improvement that NGOs/civil society organisations have made about sustainability standards and certification schemes (or similar multistakeholder initiatives that are using market-based approaches to drive sustainability impacts). This research will serve as an input to ISEAL's revision and integration of our Codes of Good Practice, helping us to better reflect the priorities of this stakeholder group.

### Background

ISEAL's Codes of Good Practice provide a globally recognised framework, defining practices for effective and credible sustainability standards and similar systems. ISEAL is currently revising and integrating the ISEAL Impacts, Standard-Setting, and Assurance Codes of Good Practice, along with essential practices from the ISEAL Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide, into a single [Code of Good Practice](#).

The revision and integration of the Codes of Good Practice provides opportunities to improve the value of the Codes and Code compliance by taking a more holistic view of what a credible and effective sustainability system looks like. It aims to update content and strengthen requirements to reflect changes in the sustainability landscape to ensure sustainability systems are fit for purpose and deliver against their responsibilities.

A public consultation on the first draft of the Code was held between September and December 2022. The consultation aimed to solicit feedback from a wide range of stakeholders that would have an interest in the Code. NGOs (and civil society more broadly) are a key stakeholder group that has specific expectations of what credible and effective sustainability standards and similar systems should look like. Unfortunately, we did not receive much direct feedback from this stakeholder group, so this assignment is intended to support us in addressing this by identifying their priorities for sustainability standards and similar systems, including the limitations or gaps in performance that they have previously identified, so that we can account for these in the next draft of the Code.

We are seeking a consultant to review the literature about sustainability standards and similar systems that has been published by key NGOs/civil society organisations active in this space. The consultant should identify and summarise the main expectations or critiques (i.e., limitations or gaps in performance identified) of sustainability standards and similar systems and the main recommendations made for the improvement of sustainability systems. The consultant should also provide a precis of the approach and the context of each publication (e.g., sectoral and geographic scope, thematic focus, methodology behind the recommendations made, publication date, etc.).

### Activities

- Identify a longlist of NGOs/civil society organisations with an interest in sustainability standards and similar systems and verify this with the Code development team.

- Identify, and verify with the Code development team, the necessary contextual information about the publications reviewed to include in the report.
- Identify a longlist of publications about sustainability standards and similar systems that have been produced or commissioned by these organisations within the last 5-7 years and recommend a shortlist of at least 15 publications for review, verifying this shortlist with the Code development team. The shortlist should account for a balance of contexts and a balance of views (e.g., Global North & Global South).
- Review the shortlisted publications (at least 15) to identify the main expectations or critiques of sustainability standards and similar systems, noting also the significant points of commonality or difference amongst these.
- Identify recommendations for sustainability standards and similar systems on improvements needed where they exist within the literature and, where possible, extrapolate recommendations where they do not exist.

### **Deliverables**

- A short report, ideally 10-15 and no more than 20 pages, that includes an overview of the publications reviewed and provides a summary of the main critiques or weaknesses identified alongside the recommendations made for the improvement of sustainability standards and similar systems.

### **Profile of consultant**

The ideal candidate is familiar with the purpose of the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice, with sustainability standards and similar systems, as well as their NGO and civil society stakeholders. They will be experienced in undertaking desk-based research that feeds into strategic decision-making and have a strong knowledge of the sustainability landscape and issues.

### **Budget and timeline**

ISEAL has a budget of GBP 3,000 to 5,000 for this project. The project deadline is 31 March 2023.

Please email [consultation@isealliance.org](mailto:consultation@isealliance.org) with your proposal by 10 March 2023.