Moving Towards a Common Approach: Environmental and Social Standards for UN Programming

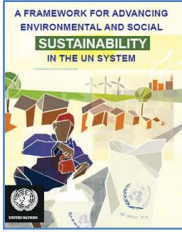## WHY does the UN system need a common approach to environmental and social standards?

Robust social and environmental standards (e.g. safeguards), and related accountability mechanisms (e.g. grievance mechanisms), are increasingly applied as best practice in a broad range of international programming and investments for sustainable development. In practical terms, such standards aim to enhance the quality of interventions by maximizing benefits and avoiding inadvertent harm to people and the environment. They also recognize that, even with good planning and best intentions, unanticipated impacts may still arise so accountability mechanisms need to be in place to receive, assess and respond to grievances from project-affected people. Such measures support a rights-based and risk-informed approach that is transparent, inclusive and participative so that no one is left behind.

In recent years, several UN agencies have put in place or started to put in place social and environmental standards for programming. This is a positive development, but it also presents a challenge for ensuring policy coherence at the country level. The UN system needs to ensure not only that its social and environmental standards are based on relevant international agreements and conventions, but also that it avoids multiple interpretations of what this means in the context of programming. Coordinating and consolidating UN agencies' efforts to this end will help move the system towards greater alignment, transparency and accountability and would facilitate delivery of the SDGs. More specifically, a common approach would support delivery of the following **benefits and objectives**:

- **Delivering as One**: ensure normative principles of the UN are consistently operationalized through programming, at the country level in particular, and prevent the risk of communicating different standards at the country level.

- **Communication**: allow the UN/UNCTs to collectively communicate to partners (e.g. at Country level partners, civil society) to explain how we are applying a common approach and moving towards greater alignment.

- **Fit for Purpose/SDGs**: demonstrate the UN system is walking the talk and integrating the SDG agenda into the way we do our work and applying the UN normative framework to support that agenda.

- **Efficiencies**: enable the use of shared trainings, tools, rosters and guidance, benefitting from relevant expertise from across the system.

- **Access to Financing**: help ensure continued access to financing that is increasingly tied to social and environmental standards and accountability policies (e.g. Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility, bilateral donors).

- **Joint Programming**: facilitate the use of common standards and tools in the context of joint programming.

- **Collective Learning**: support a collective learning approach to the application of social and environmental standards in UN programming.

WHAT will a common approach be based on?

The common approach will build on the "[Framework for Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System](#)" which recognizes the need for the "*UN system to internalize the internationally agreed norms of the sustainability agenda …. through a **common framework** for environmental and social sustainability, including through safeguards, risk management, institutional learning, capacity-building, simplification, coherence and transparency*".

The Sustainability Framework provides a strong basis for a common approach by outlining several minimum requirements related to ensuring social and environmental screening, assessment and management measures for programming. In addition to the Framework and related [Interim Guide](#), the following elements provide a strong basis from which to build a common approach:

1. **UN Normative Framework**: Environmental and social standards need to be based on the UN international legal and normative framework. Given UN leadership in setting such normative principles, it is critical that the UN system adhere to them in its own activities and that they are operationalized through UN programmes and projects. This is consistent with 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.

2. **UNDG Programming Principles:** The recently updated UNDG principles for common country programming (leave no one behind; human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment; sustainability and resilience; accountability) provide an important starting point for a coherent policy approach to social and environmental standards, as well as an opportunity to operationalize these principles through country-level programming. While not all UN programming occurs at the country-level or through the UN Development System, these programming principles provide a strong basis for greater alignment.

3. **Best Practice and Lessons Learned:** Environmental and social standards for programming have been applied by the multilateral development banks for decades. More recently several UN agencies have also developed and are implementing similar standards. This provides a strong basis of best practice and lessons learned from which to build a common approach. Additionally, safeguards frameworks of key financing partners, such as the Global Environmental Facility and the Green Climate Fund, will inform UN system thinking.

Key Considerations for a Common Approach to Environmental and Social Standards for UN Programming:

- Flexibility: Needs to ensure flexibility to allow for differing mandates, governance structures, operating modalities, but at the same time provide enough specificity to be a meaningful move towards greater alignment.
- Utility: Should help agencies that already have standards to identify/fill gaps and also provide a basis for agencies that are just starting the process to develop them. The purpose of a common approach is not to develop a framework for adoption verbatim by each agency nor to replace what already exists.
- Specificity: To be meaningful, needs to ensure a level of specificity that goes beyond statements of principle to setting out minimum requirements.
- Phased Approach: Needs to take a phased approach whereby applied initially by interested agencies through a time-bound voluntary phase, followed by a report back on lessons learned to refine and scale up.
- Relevance: Needs to be relevant for both development and humanitarian sides of the UN system, contributing to delivery of the SDGs and to the "New Way of Working".
- Framing: Needs to be framed around the UN system's existing commitments to apply environmental and social standards (rather than as something completely new), with a renewed focus on strengthening alignment.

HOW and WHEN will the common approach be developed? WHO is involved?

Recognizing the benefits of moving towards a common approach, the Senior Officials of the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) agreed in September 2016 to establish a new work stream under the "Consultative Process on Advancing the Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN system" (Consultative Process) to consider options for moving towards a common approach to environmental and social standards for programmes/projects. This work stream builds on the results of a pilot project conducted in 2015, with seven UN agencies testing the utility of the ESS Framework and the related Interim Guide, which identified the need for a common approach to social and environmental standards.

This new work stream is co-chaired by UNDP and IFAD. Members include FAO, UNEP, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNOPS, UN-Habitat, ILO, IMF, WHO, WFP and UNHCR. A first meeting of the group was held in February 2017, to agree on the terms of reference and a work plan. A workshop was subsequently held in Copenhagen in June 2017, hosted by UNOPS. The 2017 work plan for the group includes three key outputs:

1. **Comparative Analysis** - A detailed analysis is being conducted of agencies (FAO, IFAD, UNDP, UNEP, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNOPS)' policies/procedures and accountability mechanisms, with the support of a consultant. This includes a review and identification of the normative basis and other key benchmark standards (e.g. World Bank). The review aims to identify where there is a basis for commonality as well as where there are key differences. The analysis will be completed by 1st Quarter 2018.

2. **Knowledge Sharing Platform/Mechanism and Community of Practice -** An important aspect of moving towards a common approach will be to learn from each other to ensure that those who are beginning the process do not need to reinvent the wheel and those who are facing similar challenges can work together to find solutions. This output will consider options for platforms or mechanisms for strengthened knowledge exchange. This is an ongoing activity that will continue into 2018.

3. **Final Report - Recommendations for a Common Approach -** The group will prepare a final report summarizing findings of the comparative analysis and recommendations for a common approach, in terms of both substance and process. The recommendations for common social and environmental standards will include key minimum requirements and a proposal for how to take the common approach forward through a phased and voluntary process. Consultations with EMG members will be conducted in the first part of 2018 and a meeting of the working group will be organized in the summer to finalize.

While this work stream is taking place under the auspices of the EMG, its content has relevance for wider system-wide efforts, in particular those related to the SDGs, the New Way of Working, and Delivering as One. The group needs to identify opportunities to link to and engage with relevant inter-agency processes.