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

Robust environmental and social 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 in advertent 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 and facilitate resolution of the concerns or complaints of people who believe they have been adversely affected by the project's environmental and social impacts. Such measures support a rights-based and risk-informed approach that is transparent, inclusive and participative and reinforces the leave no one behind principle.

In recent years, several UN agencies have put in place or started to put in place environmental and social 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 environmental and social standards and practices 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 the 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, 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 is the Model Approach?

The Model Approach is a proposed approach for UN entities' environmental and social standards. UN entities are encouraged to align their environmental and social standards and safeguards for programming with the Model Approach on a voluntary basis. Voluntary alignment with the Model Approach is expected to eventually lead to more harmonized approaches among UN entities and application of good international practice regarding environmental and social sustainability and risk management, as well as alignment with existing commitments of the UN system such as the Sustainable Development Goals. A self-assessment tool has been developed to facilitate the review of UN-entity environmental and social programming policies and procedures with those of the Model Approach

The Model Approach helps UN entities with existing standards to identify and fill gaps and provides a basis for entities that are beginning to develop standards. It was developed ensuring relevance both to the development and humanitarian sides of the UN system, including emergency/crisis response and humanitarian action, as well as flexibility to fit different mandates, governance structures and operating modalities.

The Model Approach is not a prescribed policy framework. It presents a set of common benchmarks and processes across a range of guiding principles and environmental and social thematic areas that are typically addressed by entity-level safeguard policies.

The benchmarks facilitate UN entity alignment with the Model Approach by highlighting intended minimum outcomes. This provides the basis for coherence across the UN system without precluding entities from developing more ambitious standards.

Where UN entities are implementing activities jointly, including with non-UN entities, the Model Approach benchmarks may be utilized to provide a framework for harmonized approaches to addressing environmental and social issues, risks and impacts in joint projects/programmes.

MODEL APPROACH

Screening, Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Risks and Impacts

Guiding Principles

Leave No One Behind

Human Rights, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Sustainability and Resilience

Accountability

Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability

Thematic Areas

1. Biodiversity, Ecosystems and Sustainable Natural Resource Management
2. Climate Change and Disaster Risks
3. Community Health, Safety and Security
4. Cultural Heritage
5. Displacement and Involuntary Resettlement
6. Indigenous Peoples
7. Labour and Working Conditions
8. Pollution Prevention and Resource Efficiency

HOW was the Model Approach developed?
WHO was involved?

The Model Approach was produced by the 'Consultative Process on Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System' established by the UN Environment Management Group (EMG). The work built on the 'Framework for Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System' (Sustainability Framework) and associated Interim Guide.

An inter-agency task team chaired by UNDP and IFAD and with representatives from FAO, ILO, UNEP, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNOPS, UN-Habitat and WFP, supported by a consultant, developed the draft which was subject to system-wide consultation before finalisation. The group produced comparative analyses of the existing environmental and social standards in the UN system, including a review of other international entities' safeguards. This process identified specific areas of commonality and difference in both the content and scope of standards, the normative basis for key safeguard-related thematic areas. These findings became the basis for the key principles and proposed benchmarks of the Model Approach. The Model Approach was published on the EMG website on 5 July 2019.