WWF

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CREDIBLE ASSURANCE AT A LANDSCAPE SCALE

A discussion paper on landscape and jurisdictional assurance and claims

Landscape and jurisdictional approaches[1] are creating new opportunities to explore how to scale the adoption of more sustainable production practices to achieve positive social, environmental and economic outcomes. Leading global sourcing companies are expressing interest in using these approaches to engage their supply chains, meet their zero deforestation and conversion-free commitments, and make claims about their progress.

This paper from ISEAL and WWF aims to stimulate discussion about what credible assurance and claims look like for landscape initiatives.[2] We draw on lessons from sustainability standards in proposing assurance models that are robust, effective and credible. Our aim is that this paper will be of practical value to the developers of landscape-scale assessment frameworks (by discussing how to ensure the integrity of results), as well as to the regions that are establishing these approaches and the companies that aim to source from them (by clarifying the types of claims that can be credibly made).

Some of the most significant sustainability issues we face – such as deforestation and conversion of biodiverse areas, and the resulting implications for carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, indigenous rights and living income – have the potential to be addressed more effectively at a landscape or regional scale. Since these sustainability challenges result from overlapping drivers operating at scales that exceed the ability of individual actors to respond, scaled approaches can be an important complement to tested tools like sustainability standards. These approaches also have the potential to improve access and benefits for smallholders who have traditionally been marginalized in some global supply chains.

WE DRAW ON LESSONS FROM SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS IN PROPOSING ASSURANCE MODELS THAT ARE ROBUST, EFFECTIVE AND CREDIBLE.

1. Landscape approaches involve collaboration of stakeholders in a landscape to reconcile competing social, economic and environmental objectives. The term implies the implementation of 'integrated landscape management', a multi-stakeholder approach to landscape management that takes place across different economic sectors. Jurisdictional approaches are a type of landscape approach that is developed within the administrative boundaries of sub-national or national governments, usually with some emphasis on the roles of government in public policy and land-use planning. (Adapted from Denier, L., Scherr, S., Shames, S., Chatterton, P., Hovani, L., Stam, N. 2015. The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book. Global Canopy Programme, Oxford, UK.)
2. Throughout this paper, we will use the shorthand 'landscape' to encompass both landscape and jurisdictional approaches, recognizing that jurisdictional approaches are one specific type of landscape approach.

With the growing interest in landscape and jurisdictional approaches, a nascent collection of landscape tools, standards and assessment frameworks[3] is emerging to help set the parameters for this work. Initiatives are beginning to define the characteristics of effective landscape approaches and the performance metrics used to measure progress. To complement and inform these efforts, ISEAL and WWF are focusing on how credible assurance[4] can provide the means to monitor, verify and communicate progress. Credible assurance supports landscapes and the companies that source from them to make meaningful performance claims about the progress being made; provides the assurance necessary for donors, investors and new markets to invest in these regions; and enables local stakeholders to feel confident in the direction of change.

PRINCIPLES OF CREDIBLE ASSURANCE

Assurance models that are applicable at a landscape scale are still in development. However, at the heart of credible sustainability assurance is a set of principles and desired outcomes that are relevant regardless of the assurance model employed (see ISEAL's Assurance Code of Good Practice). Whether the focus of assurance is on assessing a set of practices in a production unit or on monitoring progress against a specific performance metric at a landscape scale, these principles will be relevant and will help to ensure the rigour and validity of the assurance process:

Consistency: There is a publicly accessible monitoring and verification methodology and reporting framework that is consistently applied within the landscape initiative.

Competence: Data analysts, assessors and other assurance personnel have appropriate qualifications and training, are evaluated for their competence, and maintain their skills and knowledge through ongoing training and calibration.

Impartiality: Independent oversight of the monitoring process creates a system of checks and balances. The monitoring process itself is not reliant solely on self-assessments or unverified provision of data but combines these with second- or third-party verification.

Improvement: The landscape initiative compiles good quality data[5] about its performance and has sufficiently robust data management systems to distil insights that can be used by landscape actors to improve their performance and by the initiative itself to improve its effectiveness.

Transparency: There is clarity on exactly what is being evaluated, with monitoring data and the methodology behind it made available and accessible.

Efficiency: The monitoring process is streamlined to focus on measuring progress on the issues that matter. The intensity and frequency of verification is informed by risk profiles of the issues and of the landscape.

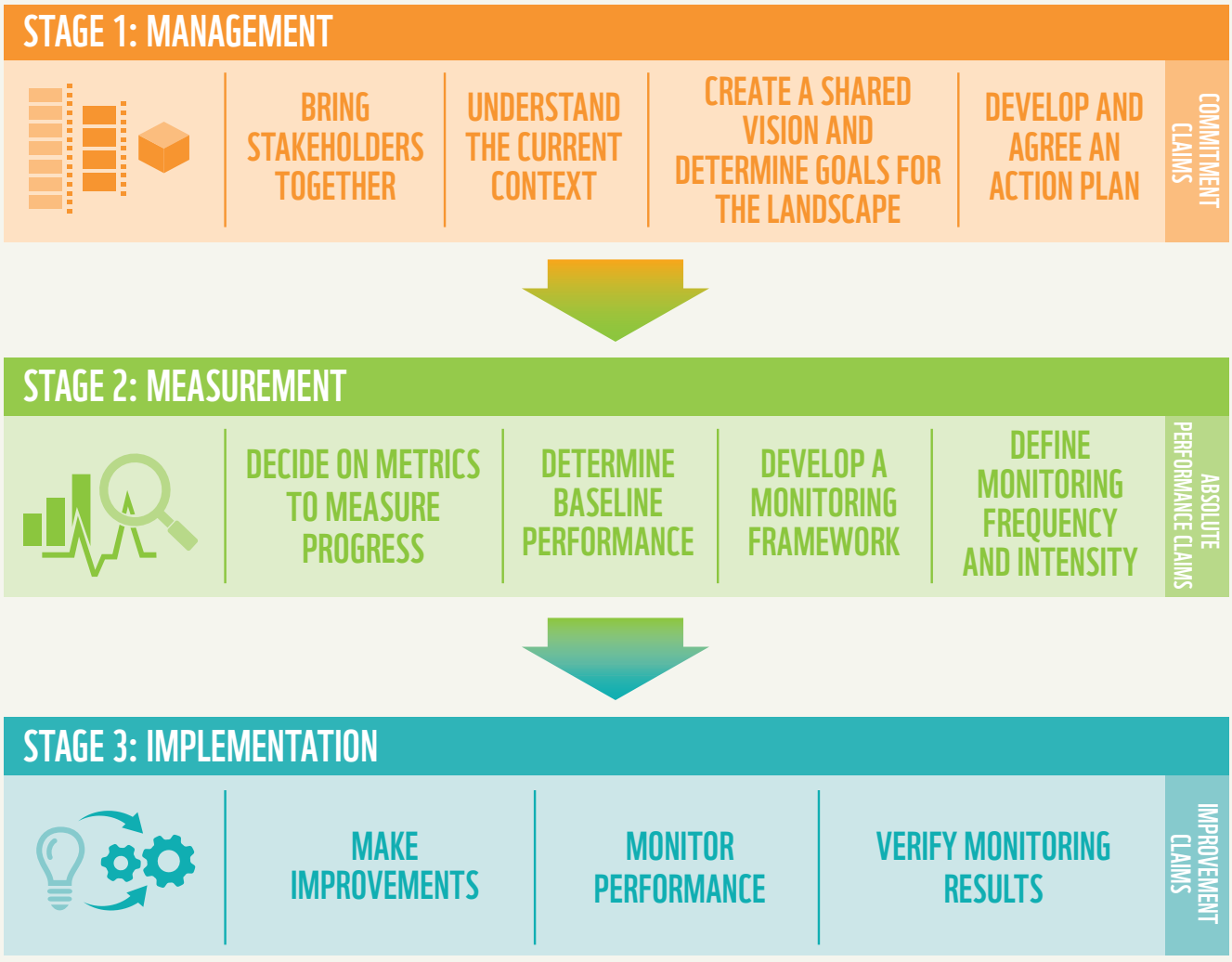
3. E.g. Verra Landscape Standard; US State Dept. Commodities/Jurisdictions Approach; Conservation International Landscape Assessment Framework; CCBA Sustainable Landscape Rating Tool; IDH Verified Sourcing Areas
4. Credible assurance in a landscape context includes both gathering information through monitoring data and verifying the integrity of that data in order to be able to make claims about performance.
5. See section on quality data parameters under Measurement framework, below.

LANDSCAPE ASSURANCE AND CLAIMS

Landscape initiatives are long-term processes that evolve through different stages of development, marking progress towards more sustainable production practices. Measuring progress at each of these stages requires different types of monitoring and verification and enables different types of claims to be made. In this section, we outline three key stages in the development arc of a landscape initiative and consider the role of assurance at each stage:

1. **Management framework development:** A multi-stakeholder process reaches agreement on sustainability goals and an action plan to get there.
2. **Measurement framework development:** A measurement framework and monitoring metrics are defined and baseline data is collected.
3. **Implementation:** The plan is put into action, and progress against the sustainability goals is being monitored and verified.

These three stages are represented in the timeline below, showing the steps that a typical landscape initiative goes through in its development, and the commensurate claims possible at each stage:



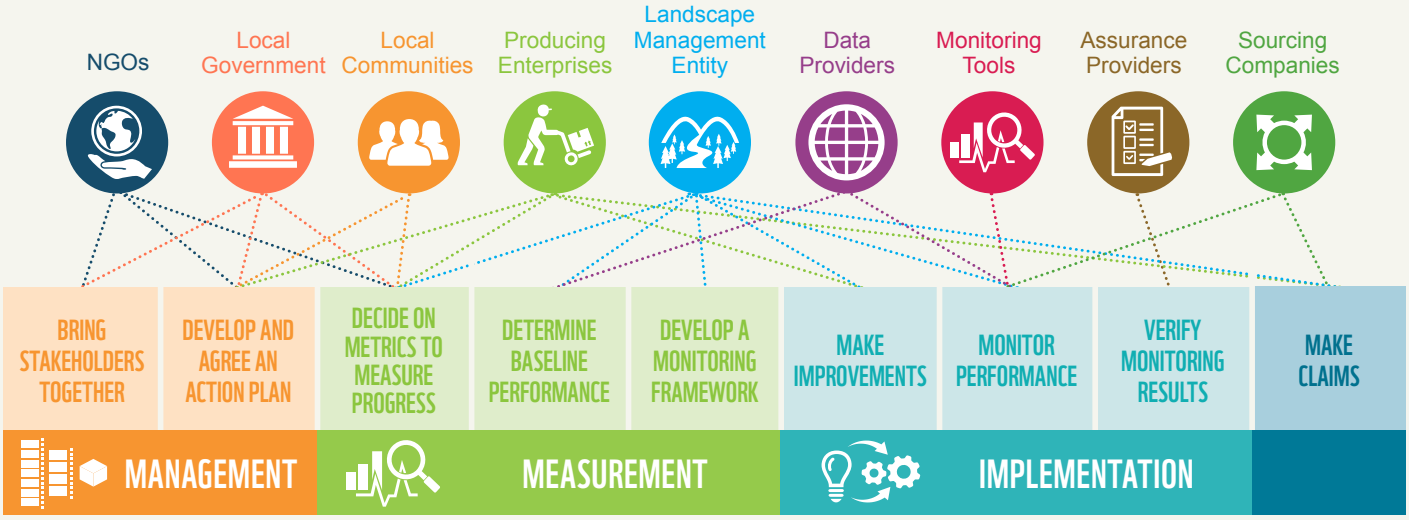
In establishing the management framework, it is already useful to start thinking about the claims that the landscape initiative and sourcing companies might want to make, as this will inform the types of assurance models needed. Many types of claims can be made, both by the landscape and by sourcing companies, mainly focusing on the progress being made and/or the results achieved. Three broad categories of claims are shown above and described here:

DEVELOPMENT STAGE	TYPE OF CLAIM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE OF CLAIM BY LANDSCAPE OR JURISDICTION	EXAMPLE OF CLAIM BY SOURCING COMPANY
1. MANAGEMENT	Commitment claims	Aspirational statement of what the initiative aims to achieve	We are committed to more sustainable production practices	We are committed to supporting more sustainable production in [landscape]
2. MEASUREMENT	Absolute performance claims	Factual statement of specific performance levels, based on baseline data	[Landscape] has no child labour	We source [x%] of our product from regions with no child labour
3. IMPLEMENTATION	Improvement claims	Progress statement about the change that has resulted	We are making progress towards eliminating deforestation by 2025.	We are helping to end deforestation in the regions where we buy our cocoa.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Landscape initiatives, by nature, engage a wide range of stakeholders across a variety of functions. To get a better sense of who is responsible for what, the diagram below suggests who might be involved in the core functions of the three development stages. Actual engagement by different stakeholders is likely to vary across landscape initiatives. For example, sourcing companies often play important roles in developing the management framework and in supporting improvements during implementation. Likewise, communities may perform additional functions when they are also commodity producers. The role of 'landscape management entity' is often played by one of the other stakeholders, such as an NGO or local government.

From an assurance perspective, several stakeholders may be involved in collecting data to monitor performance. However, verifying the monitoring results should be the responsibility of an assurance provider (organization or individual) that is independent from the landscape initiative.



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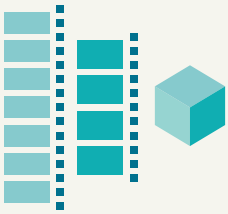
The Orinoquía region in Colombia is the second-largest savannah in South America, but is attracting increasing agricultural interest. The Orinoquia Sustainable Integrated Landscape initiative aims to balance conservation and development through land-use planning and improved governance to regulate conversion, sustainable land use and management, and strengthened public-private coordination around low-carbon development goals.



DEVELOPING A MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

STAGE 1: MANAGEMENT

Developing a management framework is the formative stage that establishes the groundwork for action. This stage is not yet about achieving sustainability impacts but about putting the framework in place that will guide the pursuit of these impacts in later stages. The role of assurance at this stage is to verify that a robust management system is in place that will ensure consistency and continuity in implementation and monitoring.

A common set of characteristics for the effective management of landscape initiatives is emerging from the myriad pilots currently underway. These include:

- For jurisdictional initiatives specifically, an engaged government actor that is driving or supporting the change process
- An inclusive agreement by producers, local communities, sourcing companies, NGOs and government to work together on an action plan with progress indicators and long-term targets (10-15 years)
- The ability of participating stakeholders to institutionalize that commitment within a long-term policy or regulatory framework
- A legal entity (e.g. government body, multi-stakeholder platform, NGO) that is responsible for coordinating implementation
- Broadly agreed performance metrics with locally adapted targets
- An effective and transparent monitoring system to measure progress from established baselines
- Repercussions or remediation processes for lack of progress or poor performance
- An incentive structure and funding that supports improved performance at production unit and regional scales, underpinned by company, government and finance sector investments and market benefits.

Assurance

These characteristics could form the basis for an assurance process to determine the rigour and robustness of various initiatives (monitoring and metrics are picked up in more detail during the next stage). The assurance model at this stage of a landscape initiative's development would be straightforward since this is not yet about verifying performance. It could consist of an independent check of the initiative's documents and records against the checklist of characteristics described above. More detail for each element of the checklist would need to be developed to assess the robustness of the initiative. A checklist should clearly define minimum expectations for what should be in place to support credible and effective landscape approaches, but should not be so prescriptive as to inhibit practical solutions in this emergent area. Finally, following the overarching principles of credible assurance described above, the landscape initiative should make this information transparently available online.

Claims

Establishing a management system for a landscape does not, in itself, result in any sustainability improvements on the ground. So should any progress claims be allowed? As landscape approaches are long-term undertakings, incentives need to be created to encourage continued progress over time. Claims by the region or even by companies that source from the region may be one such incentive, but must come with a lot of caveats. Most importantly, a claim should not imply any type of sustainability progress, e.g. improved, responsible, sustainable. However, claims focused on 'commitments to improvement' could be appropriate and would recognize the progress inherent in multi-stakeholder alignment around a shared action plan.

DEVELOPING A MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

STAGE 2: MEASUREMENT

Building on the development of a management system or framework, the second foundational step for landscape initiatives is to develop a measurement framework. This includes defining the mechanisms and metrics for measuring progress towards the collective goals that have been set, and assessing the baseline level of performance against which to measure progress. A robust monitoring and evaluation programme underpins this work and serves a number of critical roles:

- Understanding where and to what extent progress is being achieved
- Providing insights about the effectiveness of various strategies for achieving the goals
- Enabling adaptive management in response to changing circumstances
- Providing data and information that can be shared with and communicated to stakeholders both within the landscape and outside.

Assurance

Many of the landscape frameworks referenced in the introduction are focused initially on defining the most appropriate performance metrics to measure progress on priority sustainability issues. We will not duplicate these efforts, but complement them by exploring what is needed to credibly monitor that progress.

The integrity of the monitoring system rests on a sound monitoring methodology that starts with consistency and transparency about how each performance metric is defined. At minimum, each performance metric should be accompanied by the following details:

- Data sources
- Data formats – for consistency and ability to evaluate
- Definition of who collects the data and at what level of granularity
- Baseline performance levels
- Target performance levels over time.

Additionally, good quality data shares a number of characteristics that ensure its relevance, consistency and integrity. The following checklist of broadly accepted data quality parameters[6] should inform good practice for data collection and management:

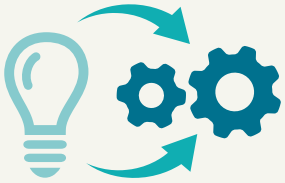
- **Relevance:** Data collected is a good measure of the issue and is applied at the appropriate scale.
- **Consistency:** Data is collected consistently in the required formats. Definitions and methodologies are the same when doing repeated measurements over time.
- **Integrity:** Data is protected from deliberate bias or manipulation for political or personal reasons. The source of the data has a high degree of veracity.
- **Completeness:** Data is complete (i.e. no missing data attributes or elements).
- **Precision:** Data has sufficient detail to measure what is intended.
- **Timeliness:** Data is representative of current conditions, up-to-date, and available when needed.
- **Availability:** Data is accessible, so it can be validated and used for other purposes.

Assurance of the measurement framework is about verifying the integrity, robustness and appropriateness of the monitoring and evaluation system. The elements of a robust monitoring and evaluation programme are outlined in ISEAL's Impacts Code of Good Practice. Practically, this assurance is about assessing the ambition of the targets and whether the interim performance steps make sense; the relevance and veracity of the chosen indicators; the accuracy of the baseline data; and the appropriateness of the measurement tools.

Claims

At the measurement framework stage, no actual progress will have been made towards improved performance in the landscape, so most claims will again be limited to statements of aspiration or commitment. However, baseline data will already give a sense of the current performance levels of the landscape. Where this baseline data shows that a positive level of performance has already been achieved for one or more issues – for example, that there is no child labour present in a landscape – this can be the subject of performance claims. A sourcing company, for example, could claim that its products from the region are free from child labour. However, these claims do not signify improvement, and a company should not imply that it has contributed to the existing situation. Care must also be taken to avoid such claims leading to companies only sourcing from landscapes where the risk of poor performance is negligible.

6. Distilled from a variety of resources such as www.betterevaluation.org/en/rainbow_framework/describe/manage_data



STAGE 3: IMPLEMENTATION

The third development stage is the most far-reaching, applicable across the lifespan of a landscape initiative. While there are likely to be distinct phases in the implementation of a landscape initiative, it is important to maintain a consistent approach to monitoring performance.

IMPLEMENTING A LANDSCAPE INITIATIVE

Assurance

Once a landscape initiative is operational and action is being taken on the ground to improve performance, the focus of assurance shifts to monitoring and verifying the progress that is being made towards the defined sustainability goals, using the metrics and baselines already established. The credibility of the landscape initiative is based on the quality of the monitoring system and the integrity of the data that derives from it, much the same as for the previous stage.

Monitoring

The quality of the monitoring system is dependent on putting in place the right monitoring approach for any given landscape – there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Data collection methods range from tools like satellite monitoring to more traditional data collection methods like field audits, depending on the issue and the context. Four main factors influence the choice of monitoring approach:

(i) The type of issue being assessed

(ii) The risk profile of those issues in a given place

(iii) The scale at which assessment is feasible

(iv) The assessment tools available.

The type of issue informs how the other three factors are considered:

1. **What assessment methodologies or monitoring tools are available to measure performance against an issue?** e.g. how you employ satellite imagery is very different from household surveys.
2. **At what scale does it make sense to measure the issue?** e.g. deforestation is most meaningfully measured at a landscape scale; child labour is most often measured at an enterprise level.
3. **What is the risk profile of that issue in that place?** Where there is a greater risk of poor performance in a region or where other risk characteristics exist (e.g. corruption), the frequency and intensity of assurance will increase.

Risk profile

Risk profiles are becoming increasingly important as a tool to improve the effectiveness of assurance, by correlating data collection intensity to where risks are highest. Essentially, risk analysis is about gathering information from different sources to assess the relative risk that a problem will occur. That probability, along with the severity of the consequences if the event does occur, should inform the rigour and intensity of the monitoring. For example, if a risk assessment determines that there is a high likelihood of child labour occurring in a region, then the monitoring methodology used would have to be quite granular, such as annual or more frequent assessment at a household or community level. Conversely, if the risk of child labour is low, monitoring of this issue may not need to be as intense or as frequent as for other issues with higher risks.

The caveat is that risk assessments are subjective. They can vary based on what information is used to inform a risk categorization, who carries out the assessment, how risks are characterized (e.g. deciding what constitutes a high risk), and the implications for the monitoring methodology of different risk categorizations. A credible risk assessment process must be consistent, competent and transparent. Both the methodology for the risk categorizations and the resulting risk profiles should be made available. It is also good practice that interested stakeholders have opportunities to contribute to and reflect upon the risk characterization. Finally, it is worth examining existing risk assessments and the methodologies behind them to replicate good practices and potentially improve consistency in the assessments.

Risk assessments should be developed on an issue-by-issue and region-by-region basis; the risk profile for an issue in one landscape may look very different in another. For each issue, a risk assessment involves the following steps:

- **Identify information sources** that are relevant to the issue in that landscape. Ideally, the types of data collected should be consistent from one region to the next. Information sources can be specific to the industry (e.g. worker safety data, certification reports) or to the region or country (e.g. corruption index).
- **Build a risk profile** based on an analysis of the information sources. In the context of determining appropriate monitoring approaches, probability of occurrence is key. The risk profile should explicitly define what constitutes different frequencies of occurrence, and severity of consequences.

The following table shows a very basic example of risk categorizations based on probability and consequence. Where either probability or consequence is unknown, the precautionary principle should be followed, increasing the potential risk categorization.

CONSEQUENCES		PROBABILITY OF OCCURRENCE					
		FREQUENT	LIKELY	OCCASIONAL	SELDOM	UNLIKELY	UNKNOWN
		A	B	C	D	E	F
CATASTROPHIC	1	Extremely high	Extremely high	High	High	Medium	Extremely high
CRITICAL	2	Extremely high	High	High	Medium	Low	Extremely high
MODERATE	3	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	High
NEGLIGIBLE	4	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
UNKNOWN	5	Extremely high	Extremely high	High	High	Medium	Extremely high

- **Determine the implications of the risk categorization** for the choice of monitoring approach. The level of risk could inform the type of monitoring tool that is appropriate, the scale at which it is applied, the frequency with which it is deployed, as well as the intensity of deployment (e.g. is the household survey conducted for every household or only for a sample of households?)

Risk profiles are works in progress and should be updated regularly to reflect changing conditions, noting that any changes in risk categorizations may have implications for the type and intensity of the monitoring tools used.

Verification

Verification of the integrity of monitoring results is critical if the landscape initiative or the companies that source from it want to make claims about improvements on the ground. While monitoring data can be collected by entities directly engaged in the landscape initiative, a core principle of credible assurance is that there is some degree of independence in the verification process. Landscape initiatives should employ independent companies or individuals to verify the appropriateness of the monitoring framework, including risk assessments, and the integrity of the monitoring data. The verification process does not have to be extensive but should be consistent, following clear and transparent procedures. Good practices for setting up a credible verification process can be found in ISEAL's Assurance Code of Good Practice.

Claims

Once a landscape initiative is focused on implementation, it should start seeing concrete improvements in sustainability performance. The two main types of claims that can be made as a result of these improvements are improvement claims and responsible or sustainable production (or sourcing) claims, though the use of the latter is severely restricted. More insight on their appropriate use is provided below.

Improvement claims

Improvement claims are relevant and applicable where progress is being measured, but they also require that the landscape has the systems in place to support continued improvement over time. Improvement claims need to be grounded in landscape systems where:

- The governance and operating system are in place and operational (as per management framework)
- Time-bound performance targets link baseline performance to sustainability goals
- Defined metrics enable meaningful assessments of progress towards those targets
- Sound monitoring methodologies lead qualified stakeholders to collect quality performance data on the defined metrics (as per the measurement framework)
- Improvements have been initiated and are being measured and communicated transparently
- There are defined repercussions for missing time-bound targets
- Monitoring results have been verified by an independent party
- There are guidelines for which claims can be made by whom, under what circumstances.

The implication of these characteristics is that successful landscape initiatives will need to have a relatively strong rule of law and social capital. Without the necessary governance and management foundations, there are fewer incentives for continuing to improve practices over time or repercussions for not doing so.

Palm oil plantation in Sabah, Malaysia, where landscape initiatives are aiming to prevent further deforestation.

For the credibility of the claim, critical elements are the level of ambition of the sustainability targets and the timelines for achieving them, along with the actual progress being made. It is important that landscape initiatives address the most critical sustainability issues occurring within that landscape. Not addressing material issues will limit the types of claims that can be made. Targets and timelines that are set through a multi-stakeholder process have an inherent level of legitimacy but can be enhanced further through reference to international norms and expectations. In these cases, international sustainability standards offer a useful reference framework. Alignment with existing standards will also serve to incentivize enterprises within the landscape to move towards certification over time.

The difficult question that arises is how much progress or improvement is good enough for improvement claims to be justified? If a landscape initiative sets unambitious targets or an excessively long timeline for meeting their targets, then they could be considered on-track even when comparatively little progress is being made. Conversely, landscapes that have set ambitious targets may not meet them, even while significant improvements are being made. There is no objective measure of how much improvement is sufficient; this will depend on stakeholder expectations, as set out by the progress milestones defined in the landscape action plan.

Landscapes that transparently make information about absolute progress available, along with information about the context in which they are working or the constraints they face, can be held accountable against their progress milestones but will also be in a stronger position to justify the extent of improvements they are making. In all cases, it will be important that the landscape initiative has either developed or adopted guidance on who can make what claims at different stages of progress, and what assurance needs to be in place to verify the integrity of data underpinning those claims.

Responsible sourcing claims

Landscape claims of being 'responsible', or company claims of sourcing 'responsibly', are perhaps the most challenging. There is no one generally accepted definition of what constitutes responsible and, in fact, responsible may look different in different contexts. This is because the claim is based on the performance of a landscape, a complex system which differs widely depending on factors such as the geographic location, ecology, social context and commodities being produced. Additionally, stakeholder understanding of what it means to be responsible is evolving. Where companies buy certified responsible or sustainable products and services, this may no longer be sufficient to claim they are sourcing responsibly. Increasingly, they are expected to also have a stake in contributing to improved practices in their sourcing regions, through direct interventions and support both within their supply chains and beyond, addressing challenges at landscape and systemic levels.

Landscapes should not use responsible or sustainable production claims unless they can show that production practices meet multi-stakeholder definitions of good practice set by existing high-performance sustainability standards and are informed by best practice guidance in initiatives like the Accountability Framework. Likewise, companies should not use responsible or sustainable sourcing claims unless they can show both that their sourced volumes meet these good practice definitions and that they are supporting landscape-level efforts to address systemic challenges.

Traceability

Companies seeking to make responsible or sustainable sourcing claims, as well as landscape initiatives that want to ensure the integrity of products leaving their jurisdiction, will also need to consider traceability. The extent to which it is necessary to trace a product back to its origin is inextricably linked to what claims are allowed and where they are made. For example, claiming that a product or ingredient derives from a specific responsible sourcing region requires that the product is traceable at least to that region or landscape. If the landscape as a whole achieves a sustainability performance metric then it is also possible to make on-product claims about that performance, based on landscape-level traceability. However, where a sourcing company wants to make a product claim about the performance of a specific enterprise that exceeds the performance of the landscape in which it is situated, it will be necessary to trace that product back to the enterprise level. Sourcing companies are responsible for having traceability and chain of custody models in place that are appropriate for the types of claims they want to make (see Annex F of ISEAL Claims Good Practice Guide for more information). Credible sustainability standards will have appropriate traceability models to ensure the integrity of products from source to market.

CHALLENGES WITH LANDSCAPE CLAIMS

Even when landscape claims are aligned with the assurance practices recommended above, a number of challenges remain that are inherent to working at a landscape scale. Three challenges that should be considered in the development of landscape assurance and claims are explored here.

Variable progress within a landscape

Companies source from individual enterprises rather than from landscapes. The challenge inherent in companies making sourcing claims based on overall landscape performance is that

the performance of individual enterprises within that landscape will vary. It is conceivable that a company can source from an enterprise that is not improving and has no intentions to do so ('free-rider') even while the landscape as a whole makes progress. The opposite is also true. In other words, even when using or relying on landscape monitoring data, investors or companies still experience risk exposure tied to individual suppliers or enterprises.

A critical question for sourcing companies and for the landscape initiative as a whole is whether all enterprises in a landscape need to be making progress or if it is sufficient for the key landscape metrics to be moving in the right direction? Sourcing companies or investors might need landscape-level information that reflects these broader trends, combined with supplier-specific data that provides granular information, in order to have visibility on supplier-specific risks. Unless a landscape can make a claim that all production within its boundaries meets certain criteria (e.g. zero deforestation), a company will have to complement landscape-level claims (e.g. reduced deforestation across the landscape) with a more specific claim tied to its own supply chain (e.g. zero deforestation within the production unit). This links with the traceability considerations outlined above.

Lack of progress or negative performance

The nature of improvement is that it is not linear. In complex systems there are multiple variables, both positive and negative, that affect performance, and these can wield greater or lesser influence over time. Consequently, performance levels on deforestation, for example, may improve one year but not the next. If a landscape or sourcing company ties its claims to those improvements, the challenge is to understand at what point the lack of progress, or even negative performance, undermines the credibility of the claims being made.

One way to address this question could be to set longer timeframes for improvement against different issues so that trends in progress can be reflected. For example, deforestation rates can be measured frequently, but a reconciliation might happen only every three years to understand better whether those rates are trending in the right direction. Where deforestation risks are high, this reconciliation period may need to be shorter. Additionally, parameters could be set for each progress target that indicate minimum performance levels below which remediation or other consequences are triggered.

One implication is that sourcing companies will need to be clear about their actions in the face of lack of progress. These might include deferring preferential sourcing away from that region, increasing investment to accelerate progress, or some combination of the two. While it is important for sourcing companies to send market signals that incentivize actual performance improvements, a landscape will obviously be better served by increased investment rather than by those companies cutting their losses.

Attributing landscape improvements

"If a company sources from a region but doesn't invest in the landscape initiative or improvements that are happening in that region, is it still entitled to make responsible sourcing claims?"

Where a company seeks to make claims related to improvements in the landscapes it sources from, this raises questions about the minimum level of effort or investment by the company in those landscapes, as well as the extent to which landscape improvements can be attributed to that effort. If a company sources from a region but doesn't invest in the landscape initiative or improvements that are happening in that region, is it still entitled to make responsible sourcing claims? As with free-riders within a given landscape, there might also conceivably be free-riders downstream – companies claiming the benefits of sourcing from a landscape that is making progress, without making any sourcing decisions, investments or interventions to support that progress.

In practice, companies will source from multiple landscapes, potentially sourcing only a small percentage of the commodity produced in any given landscape. Their ability both to influence landscape-wide performance and to invest meaningfully in all the landscapes they source from is limited. However, this influence grows when a significant share of companies coherently applies landscape sourcing and investment strategies and adheres to similar assurance models and claims management in doing so. Sourcing companies are starting to collaborate more at a landscape level to coordinate their interventions for increased effect. These types of collaboration are welcome and would strengthen the case for those companies making claims of supporting improvement. There is also value in considering whether a company that invests across a number of landscape initiatives should be able to make improvement claims about a specific landscape, even if progress there cannot be attributed to its investment.

CONCLUSIONS

Landscape approaches are works in progress. They are complicated and nuanced and context-specific. Their success will depend in part on the right combination of incentives and structures to drive continued improvement over time. Robust assurance and claims frameworks form an important part of these incentives and structures. In this discussion paper, we have sought to contribute to the dialogue about how best to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of landscape approaches through appropriate assurance models for monitoring, verifying and communicating progress in (i.e., making claims about) a landscape. In coming to our recommendations, we have drawn on lessons learned from sustainability standards, some of which are also adapting their models to apply at a landscape scale.

This paper is a first exploration of what should be in place for credible landscape assurance and claims and is intended to stimulate further discussion. We recognize that there are layers of complexity that need to be unpacked before coming to concrete recommendations about what tools are appropriate for monitoring progress on specific sustainability issues in discrete landscape contexts, and what verification practices are necessary to ensure the integrity of that monitoring. ISEAL and WWF are committed to engaging with existing landscape initiatives and pilot projects and with the various good practice frameworks under development to work through these issues. Together, we hope to move towards agreement about what needs to be in place to credibly assure progress in a landscape and to ensure claims appropriately reflect that progress.

iseal alliance

ISEAL Alliance is the global association for credible sustainability standards. ISEAL members include 23 of the leading global sustainability standards organizations. Their members support the delivery of sustainable value chains and have pioneered the design and application of standards to link sustainable production and consumption across international trade.

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To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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