



Partnerships for
Forests

Advancing smallholder
farmers' voices in the Global
Platform for Sustainable
Natural Rubber

Case study
June 2021



Advancing smallholder farmers' voices in the Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR)

It is estimated that 85% of rubber production comes from smallholder farmers, making them an essential part of any effort to improve sustainability in the sector. This case study examines how GPSNR went about improving the representation and voice of smallholders across six countries in a meaningful way.

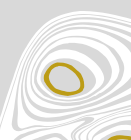
Natural rubber cultivation has accelerated in the past ten years, with global production rising 40% since 2009¹. This has led to the devastation of some of the world's most endangered forests. In Southeast Asia, rubber cultivation areas make up around 72%¹ of the area allocated to oil palm but, internationally, rubber production has not yet faced the same level of scrutiny. In fact, natural rubber is one of the few commodities that does not yet have global regulations or binding standards.

Recognising the risks that unsustainable natural rubber cultivation poses to forests, people and prosperity, the companies represented by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) Tire Industry Project (TIP) launched the **Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR)** in March 2019. As a global, multi-stakeholder initiative it has been working to align supply chain actors to identify and address the social and environmental challenges associated within the industry. Initially when the platform was formed, there were no organisations that represented

smallholder rubber farmers in the platform. With 85% of global natural rubber production coming from smallholder farmers², it was recognised that to bring about lasting change, there needed to be meaningful representation of smallholders in the platform.

Studies of multi-stakeholder initiatives found that the exclusion of smallholders in early stages was partly justified due to the perception that a small selection of smallholders would be unable to consult and represent the entire community. However, the absence of these communities poses a risk to the legitimacy and transparency of any platform. Without their involvement, the platform risks being undermined and makes it likely that deforestation will continue.

To achieve this, the Smallholders Representation Working Group (SHWG) was created and assigned to coordinate actions to identify and secure adequate smallholder representation within GPSNR.



The rubber value chain

Where is rubber grown?

The primary commercial source of natural rubber latex is the Amazonian rubber tree, *Hevea brasiliensis*. Native to the tropical Americas, it grows best in humid, tropical lowland conditions, which makes many parts of Asia well suited to natural rubber production. Thailand and Indonesia account for 56% of global production while China, India, Malaysia and Vietnam account for a further 32% of global rubber production¹.

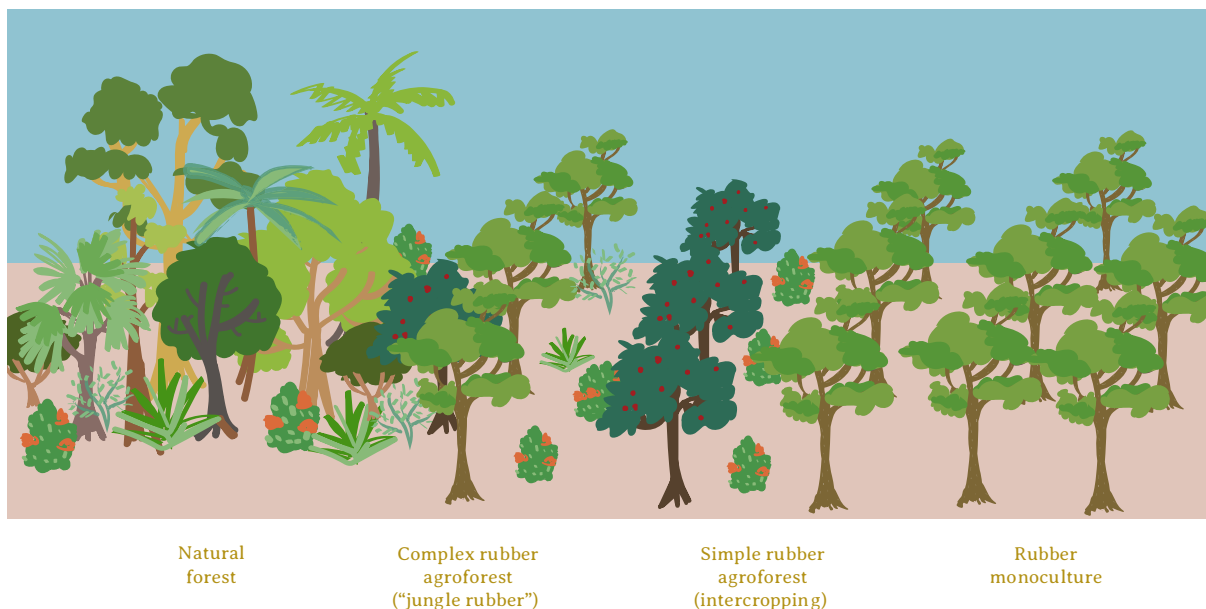
In Brazil and Peru, rubber naturally grows in forests, where tappers can cultivate it without adversely impacting the rainforest (Figure 1). This is similar to ‘jungle rubber’ harvesting that can be found in Kalimantan, Indonesia: an agroforestry technique whereby various crops such as fruit trees and timber species are planted together and contribute to a biodiverse habitat for wildlife. However, only a small portion of rubber is grown like this. The majority of rubber is grown in monoculture by smallholders and industrial plantations, mainly due to the higher yields.

Who produces rubber?

In many countries, natural rubber production is dominated by smallholder farmers who are responsible for an estimated 85% of global production. In terms of production area, this means that of the 11 million hectares (ha), 10 million are managed by smallholders¹.

There are some notable differences in production between countries: in Thailand up to 95% of rubber is produced by smallholders, with an average plot size of 1.6 ha; whereas in Vietnam only 51% is produced by smallholders; and in Brazil the average plot size is much larger – around 40% of interviewees had more than 100 ha of rubber producing land*. Producing countries also have differing structures of organisation within the natural rubber sector, but a common theme is that there are many stakeholders involved between the production and the final product stage. An example is provided in Figure 2 which shows a generalised natural rubber supply chain. Where there are several actors involved, smallholders have limited understanding of the value chain and how they contribute to it, a lack of access to training or best practice, or limited communications or lesson sharing with other smallholder farmers.

Figure 1. Different natural rubber production systems



* One key variant is worth noting: in Brazil, the definition of “smallholder” varies from other contexts. In Brazil, smallholders are those that own less than 4 ha and represent a very portion of national rubber production. Unsurprisingly, the majority of natural rubber production comes from entrepreneurs that own between 20 and 200 ha.

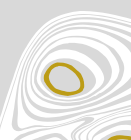
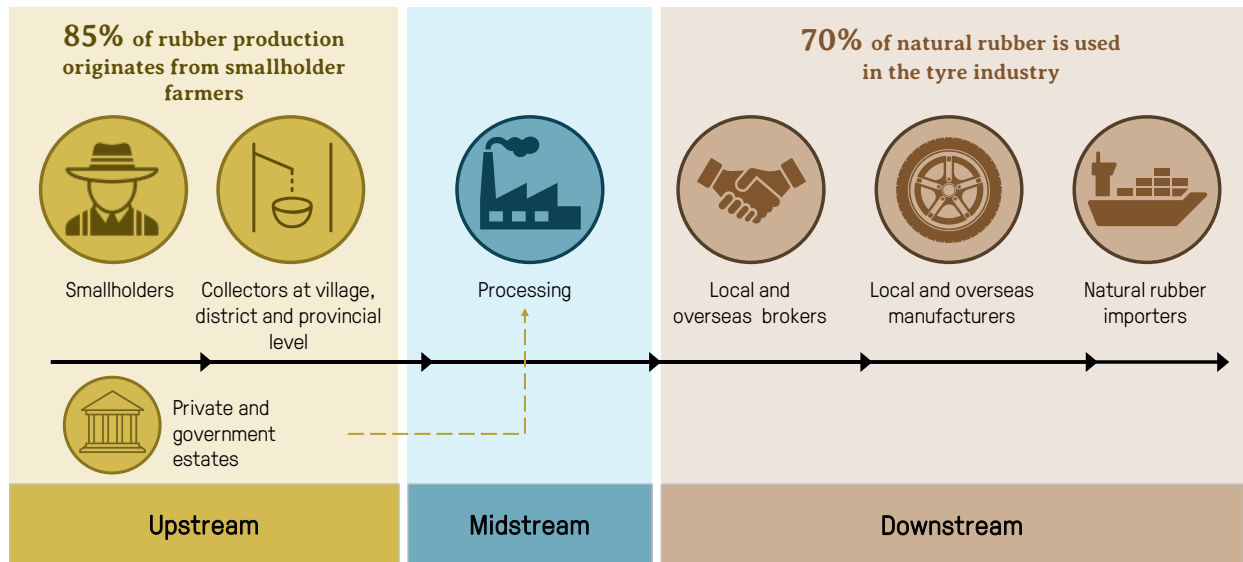


Figure 2.
The rubber value chain



The initial stages of GPSNR were driven by a handful of private sector companies that had already set responsible development and sourcing commitments. This was complemented by many governments also wanting to continue the progress made by REDD+ programmes and improve certain supply chain commitments to deforestation as part of their development strategies.

What is natural rubber used for?

Natural rubber is more resilient and longer lasting than its synthetic counterpart, making it an important and indispensable commodity.

A critical component in tyres for cars, motorbikes, trucks and planes, approximately 70% of natural rubber is used in the tyre industry³, with other key products formed from latex including shoe soles, medical grade gloves, and condoms. In Thailand alone, exports of natural rubber contribute US\$4.1 billion to the national economy⁴ which translates to approximately 6% of total exports per year⁵.

What's the problem with natural rubber?

In the past decades, it is estimated that rubber plantations replaced over 2 million ha of forest between 2000 and 2015⁶. As demand continues to soar, it is predicted that a further 8.5 million ha⁷ of new plantations will be required to meet global projected demand by 2024, posing a growing threat to protected tropical forests.

The impact of this expansion is likely to be the

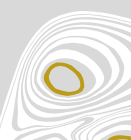
destruction of endangered animal habitats, including tigers, gibbons, and elephants, that will trigger major biodiversity loss. It is widely accepted that converting land to rubber plantations can have damaging effects on soil quality, availability of water, and biodiversity and will have knock-on effects on livelihoods. As land becomes less productive, smallholders often feel pressured to encroach into forest and high conservation-value areas in order to continue maintaining their revenues.

The GPSNR Solution

Background

When GPSNR was formed, there were no organisations that represented smallholder rubber farmers in the platform. With 85% of global natural rubber production derived from smallholder farmers it was recognised that to bring about lasting change, the team needed to find ways to meaningfully involve smallholders in the platform.

As a global, multi-stakeholder initiative, GPSNR has been working to align supply chain actors to identify and address the social and environmental challenges associated with the natural rubber industry. The platform aims to empower smallholders by giving them better access to market information and partnerships that can improve their sustainability and productivity; enable knowledge sharing; provide access to tools and innovation; communicate best practices to mitigate risk and enhance productivity; and give smallholders the



opportunity to influence sustainability developments in the natural rubber value chain.

By improving smallholder understanding of sustainable rubber cultivation and helping them improve their productivity, GPSNR aims to reduce the pressure on forested areas that are currently at risk of farm expansions.

Governance structure

GPSNR recognised early-on that their membership and governance model needed to be fully representative of natural rubber smallholder farmers and therefore the platform spent the first year designing and implementing a solution.

The platform comprises an Executive Committee, a series of Working Groups, and a Secretariat (see **Figure 3**). Its members represent approximately 50% of the world’s demand for natural rubber⁸.

In the run up to their first General Assembly in September 2020, the platform proposed a modification to their membership structure, to create a dedicated category for smallholder producers and give all five groups an equal weight (20%) when voting on decisions. Each membership category is allocated a total of three seats in the Executive Committee, with representatives chosen by elections. This adjustment is a serious commitment to

democratisation of a commodity initiative, giving smallholders equal representation with Tyre Makers and other members within the Executive Committee.

To achieve this, the Smallholders Representation Working Group (SHWG) was created and assigned to identify and secure smallholder representation within GPSNR’s governance structure.

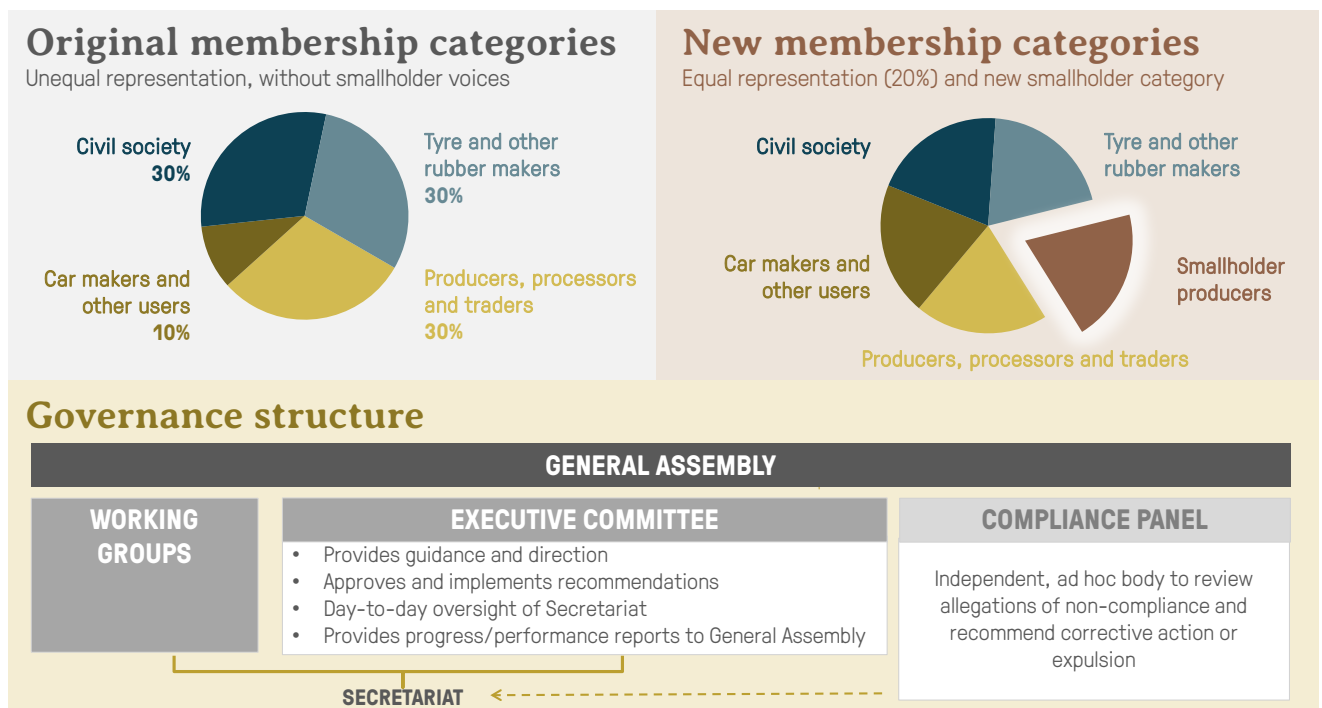
Bringing in smallholder representation

To identify potential platform members that could represent smallholders, P4F supported the SHWG and **Transitions**, a global consultancy, to research, facilitate, and deliver a series of workshops for smallholders.

In total, five workshops were held with smallholders and representative organisations in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Côte d’Ivoire (that included Ghanaian participants), and Brazil. The workshops aimed at supporting smallholders to get behind the objectives, formation, and decision-making of the platform. Through this process, smallholders were also encouraged to provide their feedback on the development, inclusiveness, and targets set by GPSNR.

The consultations with smallholders also helped GPSNR understand and address the barriers

Figure 3. GPSNR governance structure and membership categories



that they face in joining and actively participating in the platform. As a result of the workshops, Transitions developed recommendations to guide representative and meaningful participation of smallholder groups in GPSNR.

Reaching out

Before the workshops, Transitions mapped out existing organisations and structures of rubber farmers in each country that could help the team initially reach smallholders.

Transitions undertook significant research and outreach to identify and encourage smallholder representatives to join each workshop (see **Figure 4**). The invitees were selected based on the geographic locations of their farms as well as the size, yield, and production techniques. The Transitions team wanted to ensure participants were as diverse as possible. Representatives from rubber producer organisations in each country were also invited to help in structuring strong national representation in each country.

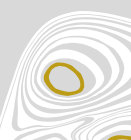
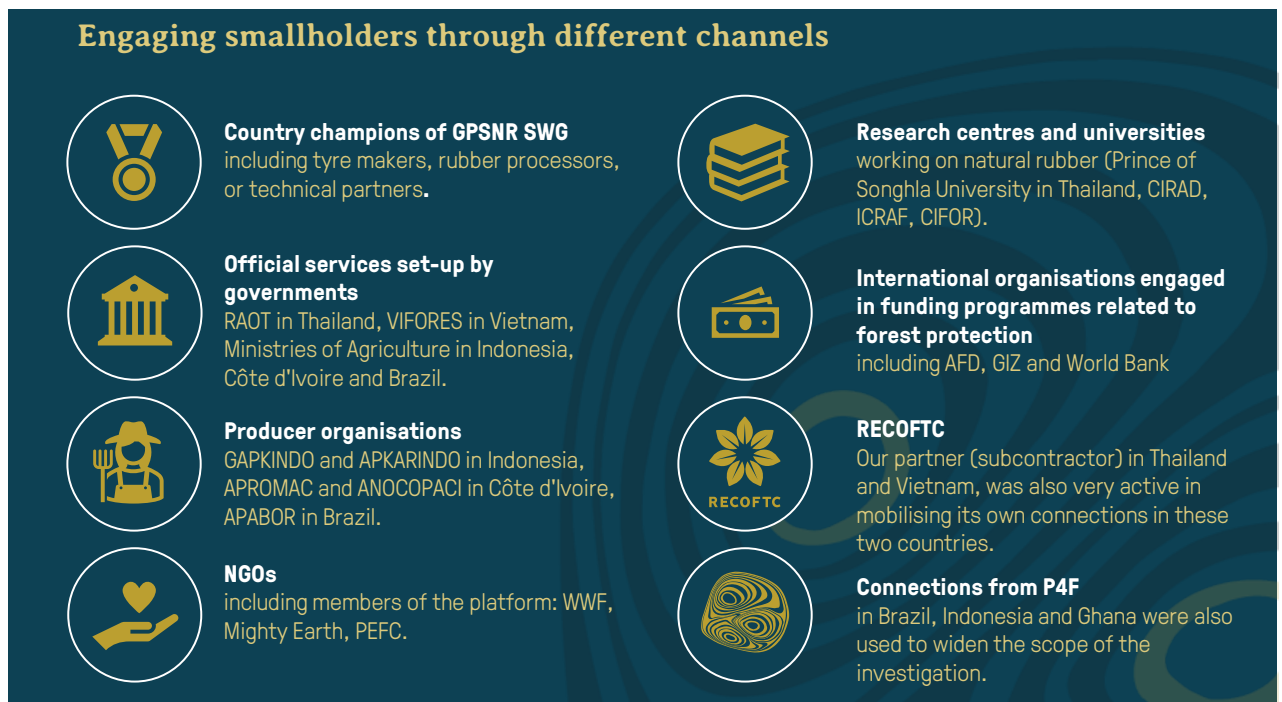
Invitees were then interviewed to share information about their activities and local context, their expectations of the workshop, and their vision for sustainable natural rubber production. These interviews were conducted in smallholders' native languages to ensure information was not lost in translation as well as build trust with the facilitation team.



It was clear from the beginning that the missing link, and the most important stakeholder group when you look at production of natural rubber, was smallholders. In order to make GPSNR a truly multi-stakeholder initiative, we wanted to start engaging smallholders in different countries to... become part of the cocreation of GPSNR.”

- Stefano Savi, GPSNR Director

Figure 4. How Transitions reached out to smallholders through different channels



Engaging rubber smallholders across the globe



“ My hope is to have a forum to exchange information about the development in the rubber industry, to have a platform to exchange knowledge and experience, and also to develop a programme for smallholder farmer rubber rejuvenation, the different solutions to increase production and also to support smallholder farmers wellbeing or welfare.”

Kliwon, natural rubber smallholder, Jambi Province, Indonesia



“ During this workshop I want to learn from the experiences of others, to apply best practices to my family farm and to pass on knowledge to the smallholders in my local area”

Thi Loan, natural rubber smallholder, Dak Lak province, Vietnam



“ This global platform will help us to talk amongst all smallholders in different countries so we can all present what hasn't worked and what our solutions are in other countries.”

Roland, natural rubber smallholder, Daloa, Côte d'Ivoire



“ If we come together united, I believe we can solve many problems, throughout the value chain.”

Prasit, natural rubber smallholder, Uthai Than Province, Thailand



“ I had not before had the opportunity to meet smallholder producers from other countries. I think it's very important we know each other better, to know the difficulties and qualities to share and decide about the future.”

Maria Theresa, rubber producer, Sao Paulo, Brazil



“ I believe this platform will give me power as a smallholder representative to bring issues, to improve communication, and to share the issues that smallholder farmers have faced.”

Amiruddin, smallholder farmer, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia

This initial investigation was also an opportunity to get a better understanding of power dynamics and critical issues at stake that might have an impact on building a robust picture of rubber production in each country. This information was essential to prepare the facilitators for the workshops and tailor an agenda around the needs of each diverse group.

Creating a collaborative space

Each workshop had around 20 participants and lasted between two and three days. Transitions used a range of facilitation techniques to encourage smallholders to express their vision, concerns, and queries, and support a two-way dialogue (see **Box 1**). The facilitation process focused on enhancing smallholders' voices through facilitated group work, ensuring the team created a safe environment where participants felt free to express their opinions.

Techniques employed included:

- Small group discussions
- 'Six Thinking Hats' method by Dr Edward de Bono
- Contextual presentations
- Active mapping exercises
- Direct interaction with GPSNR leadership

Where it was deemed useful, the workshops also included visits to processing facilities, allowing smallholders to better understand the rubber value chain. Feedback from participants indicated the field visits to the processing facility was a valuable component as it provided them with an opportunity to see first-hand how the rubber they produce is transformed into final products.

Throughout the workshop smallholders were encouraged to share what they saw to be the constraints, needs, and concerns regarding the platform. As Bruno Rebelle from Transitions explained: "We came back as often as we could to the personal experience of people, really starting from their own feelings, their own constraints, their own results, in order to make a link between their life and the proposal we are trying to push forward." This information will allow GPSNR to better ensure smallholders are meaningfully engaged in their long-term vision.

For many smallholders these workshops were the first time they had attended an event related

to natural rubber outside of their producing regions. For most, it was also the first time they had been encouraged to meet with their peers across the value chain and representatives from industry.

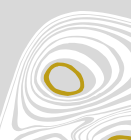
Connecting people

During the workshops, virtual networking groups, such as WhatsApp groups, were established for each country so that participants could keep in touch after the event. Since the workshops, these groups have been very active with smallholders sharing a range of information about prices, harvesting techniques, training material, pictures from their rubber gardens and trees etc.



Everybody wants to be sustainable but it's important to have those sustainability standards clear. And the rubber producers can help a lot by implementing those standards and disseminating them through all rubber producing properties."

**- Elizeu Vicente dos Santos,
natural rubber producer,
Parana, Brazil**



Box 1. Practical tools for supporting the meaningful engagement of smallholders

The Transitions team developed a toolbox of techniques to adapt to the needs of participants and ensure workshops created a safe space for smallholders to discuss their feelings, fears, and perspectives but still left feeling accomplished. In conversation with P4F, Transitions' Bruno Rebelle described certain techniques in detail:

1. Finding a good translator/interpreter

The Transitions team spent time identifying good translators/interpreters for each workshop that understood the terminology and that could communicate effectively between the facilitator and participants. Local dialects can make this more challenging but the nature of in-person workshops made it easier to gauge people's comfort levels: "It's far more difficult to push people to take the floor in a virtual meeting than in a face-to-face meeting because you [can] see people and... see how they react, you can see body language. It's a very good indication of the moment you can ask them to take the floor... On a screen that's more difficult."

2. Conducting pre-workshop interviews

The pre-workshop interviews were run virtually and helped develop a relationship/set expectations both ways: on the one hand, they helped the facilitator know what to expect and therefore how to best serve the needs of smallholders in the room; on the other hand, they helped smallholders feel prepared to attend and contribute to discussions at the workshop. Having this personal, friendly relationship with the facilitator also helped smallholders feel more comfortable when they arrived at the workshop.

3. Starting discussions from smallholders lived experience

The team started every workshop with roundtable introductions and examples of people's experience in rubber production. Participants were asked to talk about their farms, other sources of livelihoods they had, and any issues they have faced in rubber production. This helped people start discussions from their experiences and then step by step the Transitions team worked with participants to enlarge the issues being discussed by finding similarities between the stories of participants.

4. Organising small group work

When discussions were lively and where the team felt it was difficult for participants to stay quiet, they invited people to work in groups of three or four. This ensured participants could share their point of view with others, build connections, and do so without eating into time. When it came to sharing back reactions in plenary, the facilitator actively identified similarities/differences between the groups and found ways to enrich what was previously mentioned: "It helped create ties and connections and more interaction between people. All this contributes to having a more productive process and more interaction between people."

5. Planning opportunities for informal interactions

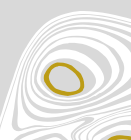
The team had designated times for socialising where participants could more organically have discussions, reflections, and build relationships. This was done through group coffee breaks and meals. Additionally, Transitions organised a field visit or practical session to each workshop: "It's a way of reconnecting the issue you're trying to discuss with the reality of the work. You can show pictures but it's completely different when you have people touching the product or seeing how it is dried or processed."

6. Visuals

"We used a range of facilitation techniques including asking smallholders to draw the issues they were facing instead of using words." This technique was especially helpful where there were language barriers or when industry jargon got in the way of the facilitator and participants understanding one another. The visualisations also helped people to think differently (e.g. kinetic learning).

7. De Bono Hats

De Bono's six hats is a technique that helps participants categorise their responses: white (facts), red (emotions), yellow (positive), green (creativity), blue (process/planning), and black (critical). It gives participants an opportunity to express their feelings (red hat) and worries (black hat) as well as identify ways to address any issues (yellow hat) and identify creative, practical steps to take forward (green and blue hats). "It worked really very well to introduce the concept of the platform, and to push smallholders to raise their concerns and their fears, but also the potential benefits they saw."



Progress to date

As of June 2021, the initiative has organised five workshops in Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Côte d'Ivoire and Brazil and is planning to schedule a second round of workshops with new key producing countries.

Following each workshop, attendees nominated a group of smallholders to become representative members to the platform. By formally joining GPSNR, these members are able to vote on platform policies, meet other stakeholders in the value chain, join and influence GPSNR working groups around capacity building, transparency, and strategy. Most importantly, their participation will also help drive sustainability for the industry.

In total, 28 smallholder members from seven countries were elected by their peers.

The smallholder workshops also led to detailed independent reports, written by Transitions, which will provide detailed information for GPSNR to consider as it develops the platform and continues to collaborate with smallholders.

In advance of the General Assembly in September 2020, which was held virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions, P4F supported Transitions and GPSNR to facilitate a series of virtual pre-meeting discussions. These online calls introduced smallholders to their international peers, allowing them to collectively discuss the main issues and opportunities they see in the natural rubber value chain. It also provided members with an opportunity to discuss the resolutions that would be voted on during the General Assembly.

At the General Assembly, members approved a crucial resolution that introduced a new membership category specifically for Smallholder Producers. The new measures will enable the equal participation of smallholder farmers in GPSNR with an equal percentage (20%) of the decision-making votes and representation (three smallholders) at the Executive Committee level. This critical resolution gives smallholders the same decision-making power as representatives from tyre companies and car makers.

The new Executive Committee structure will allow elected smallholders to review and approve decisions made by the platform on processes and standards, while also providing inputs on whether decisions are actionable and viable for smallholders. The three smallholder representatives come from Cote d'Ivoire, Thailand and Vietnam.

Lessons

The workshops with smallholders highlighted some lessons and areas for focus that will help GPSNR continue achieving their sustainability targets:

(1) Deepening engagement to ensure existing smallholder members are thoroughly integrated into GPSNR working groups and feel empowered to be part of decision-making.

The workshops identified a number of ways that could empower existing smallholder members to work closely with GPSNR. This included: accessing live translation and interpretation services; being sent invitations to meetings and events; and, partaking in consultative meetings on decisions from the platform.

(2) Building smallholder representation by continuing to support a dynamic, representative community of smallholders throughout the world.

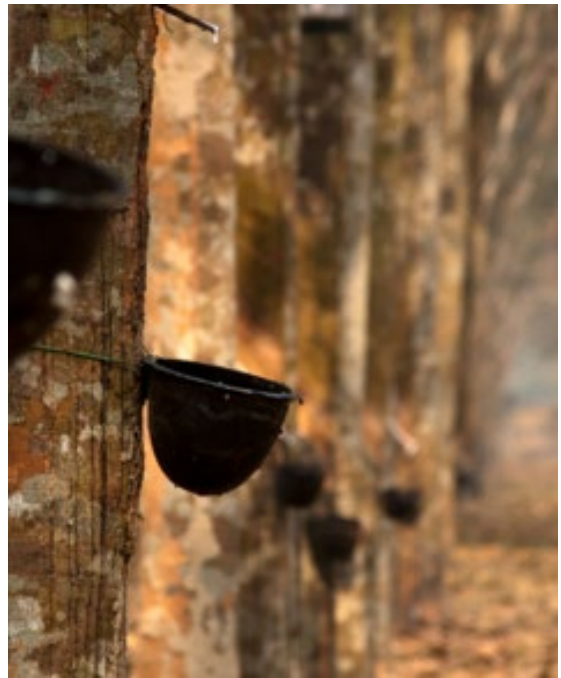
The country workshops indicated that there was strong appetite for working sessions at a national level which served as an opportunity to: strengthen communications, collaborations, and organisation at a national level; provide training; and share best practice. Moving forward, GPSNR plans to continue strengthening the networks of smallholders in producing countries by holding follow-up workshops or conducting outreach to smallholders in new geographies. Increased representation of smallholders will provide the platform with a more realistic perspective on-the-ground including as to how sustainability in the rubber value chain can be improved and sustained.



Next steps

GPSNR is currently planning and working on expanding and extending their work with smallholders. As part of that they are looking at how to continue to strengthen smallholder participation (for example, by providing interpretation of meetings and translation of documents to ensure equity of access to engagement by all smallholder representatives, organising smallholder specific meetings and other forms of enhanced smallholder participation).

They are also seeking to recruit additional members through in-country workshops and developing smallholder-specific policy documentation. Part of this development will include the preparation of proposal for additional support from P4F to support work.



References

¹ FAOstat (2021)

² Laity, R., (2021), Supporting Sustainable Rubber, PEFC, viewed 30/06/2021 <<https://pefc.org/what-we-do/our-collective-impact/our-campaigns/supporting-sustainable-rubber>>

³ GPSNR, (2018), Launching the Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber, viewed 30/06/2021 <<https://www.wbcsd.org/Sector-Projects/Tire-Industry-Project/News/Launching-the-Global-Platform-for-Sustainable-Natural-Rubber>>

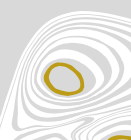
⁴ Workman, D., (2021), Natural Rubber Exports by Country, World's Top Exports, viewed 30/6/2021, <<http://www.worldstopexports.com/natural-rubber-exports-country>>

⁵ Ei Win, H., (2017), Economic Importance of Rubber in Thailand, Centre for Applied Economics Research, Kasetsart University. <<https://ap.fftc.org.tw/article/1240>>

⁶ WRI (2020), Deforestation Linked to Agriculture, World Resources Institute, viewed 30/6/2021, <https://research.wri.org/gfr/forest-extent-indicators/deforestation-agriculture?utm_medium=blog&utm_source=insights&utm_campaign=globalforestreview>

⁷ Warren-Thomas, E., Dolman, P. And D. Edwards (2015)., Increasing demand for natural rubber necessitates a robust sustainability initiative to mitigate impacts on tropical biodiversity. Conservation Letters. Vol. 8 Issue 4, 230-241.

⁸ GPSNR, (2020), GPSNR: New policy framework drives commitment to sustainable natural rubber production, sourcing. Viewed 30/6/2021 <<https://www.wbcsd.org/Sector-Projects/Tire-Industry-Project/News/GPSNR-New-policy-framework-drives-commitment-to-sustainable-natural-rubber-production-sourcing>>



Acknowledgements

Writer

Poppy Jacobs, Project Officer

Graphics and Visuals

Helen Early and Judith Woodman, External Relations & Knowledge

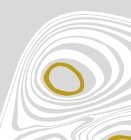
Julia Lima

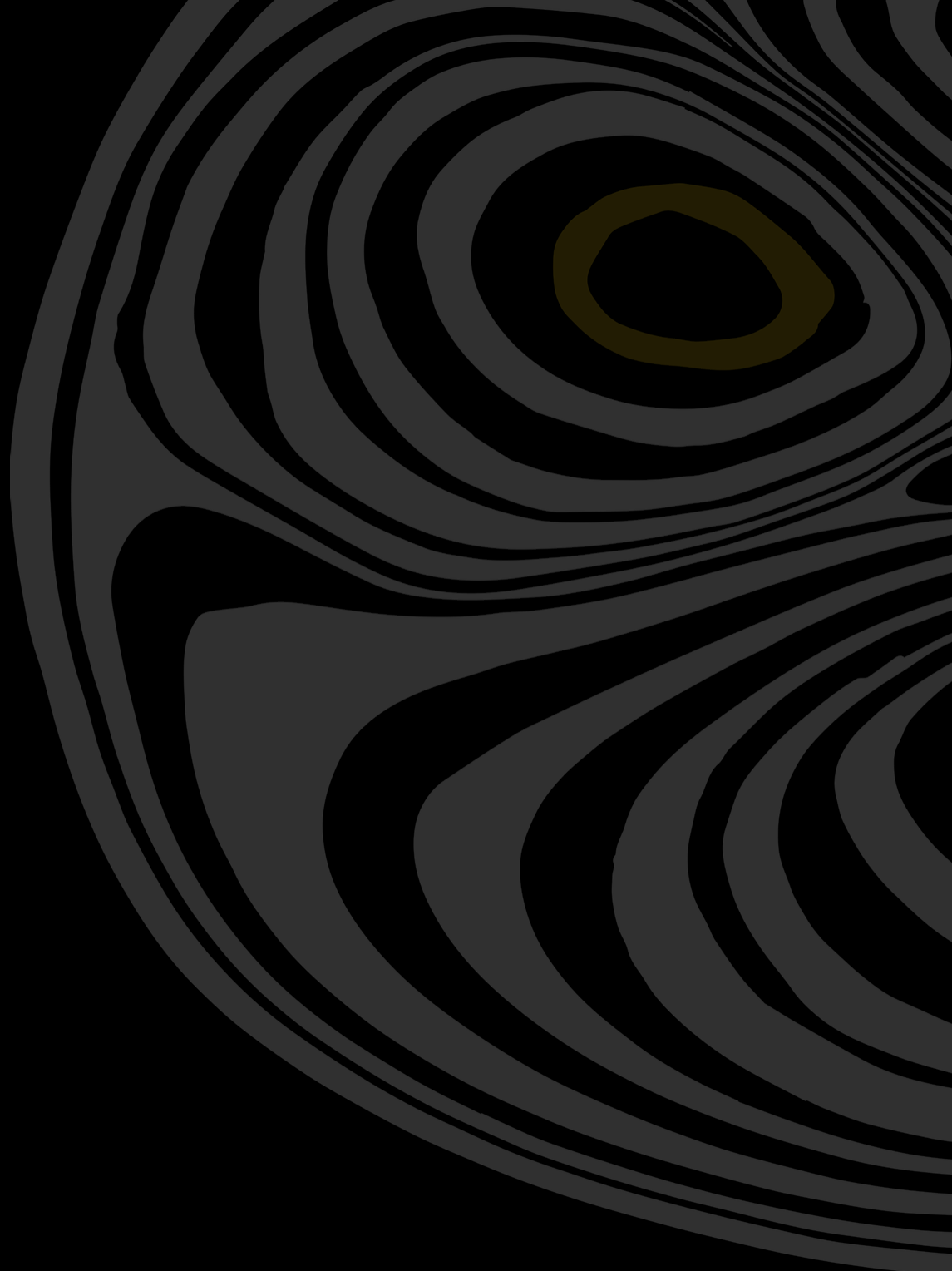
Editorial Support

Stephanie Andrei, Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning

Images

© RLU (Cover), GPSNR (2), WBCSD (11).





Partnerships for
Forests



Catalysing investments in
forests and sustainable land use



www.partnershipsforforests.com