



Case Study

Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber

Developing policies with
and for smallholders

July 2023



Rubber tree plantation



Summary

The multi-actor Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR) works to improve the sustainability of the rubber value chain. Until recently, the platform had only one Company Policy Framework with sustainability commitments for member companies, but this didn't apply to smallholder members. To address this, GPSNR has been developing a Smallholder Policy Equivalent (SPE) to sit alongside the original framework. The content

and structure of the SPE will be informed by input and recommendations from smallholder members, gathered in close collaboration with the High Conservation Value Network via online questionnaires, focus group discussions and regional calls. This case study shares lessons from engaging smallholders throughout the policy development process, providing an example for other commodity platforms seeking to develop similar policies involving smallholders.

Background

Most of the tropical regions where rubber, harvested from the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree, is produced are rich in biodiversity and resources that are vital for local and indigenous communities. They also play a critical role in absorbing and storing vast amounts of carbon dioxide, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Eighty-five percent of the world's natural rubber is produced in Southeast Asia¹, where global demand for the commodity has led to almost four million hectares of deforestation since 1993².

Established in 2018, the Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber (GPSNR) is a multi-stakeholder initiative bringing together companies, smallholders, academia and civil society organisations (CSO) to transform the natural rubber supply chain into a sustainable, equitable and fair one. Since 2019, **Partnerships for Forests (P4F) has supported the platform to improve the representation and voice of smallholders.**

As smallholders produce 85% of natural rubber globally³, it is critical to include them in sustainable rubber production efforts to ensure the sustainability of the entire value chain.

In 2020, platform members approved the GPSNR Company Policy Framework (CPF) for natural rubber production and sourcing for private sector member companies, such as rubber processors, tyre producers and car manufacturers. The framework requires member companies to establish, or update, economic, environmental and social sustainability commitments in their natural rubber purchasing policies. The policy contains commitments on legal compliance, community livelihoods, healthy ecosystems (including zero deforestation commitments) and respect for human rights. All company members are required to demonstrate their alignment with the framework by submitting policies or documents.

However, this policy framework does not apply to GPSNR's 195 smallholder members (as of March 2023), who form their own membership category. Based across 12 countries⁴, smallholders' environmental, social and economic conditions and their capacity to implement or report on commitments differ from those of companies. In response, GPSNR is developing a separate, but related, Smallholder Policy Equivalent (SPE) to sit alongside the existing CPF.



“Once you’ve cut down all of the forest, you won’t have any more trees, and you won’t have any more rain. If you have no more rain, you won’t be able to eat because it’s the rain that gives you water to grow your food. If you have no more water, there’s no more electricity. But when there’s a forest, there’s a carbon sink, so there’s oxygen to breathe properly. So, adopting good agricultural practices is in all our interests—and so it’s in our interest to apply this policy. But the question remains, that it needs to raise the living conditions of all [rubber] farmers.”

Jacqueline N'guessan Akissi, GPSNR smallholder member in Cote d'Ivoire

1. Zoological Society of London, **Research reveals gaps in sustainability reporting for the world's biggest tyre brands**, 1 March 2022
2. Reuters, **Comment: Why are rubber companies keeping investors in the dark over deforestation risk?**, 25 May 2023
3. Muhammad Fadzli Ali, Ammar Abdul Aziz, Siti Hawa Sulong, **The role of decision support systems in smallholder rubber production: Applications, limitations and future directions**, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compag.2020.105442>
4. Brazil, Cambodia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam.



The process of developing a smallholder policy framework

To ensure that the needs, interests and capacities of smallholder members were considered, GPSNR appointed the High Conservation Value Network (HCVN) Secretariat in July 2022 to provide recommendations on the SPE's objectives, content, function and roadmap. This appointment was made possible with funding from P4F and HCVN was contracted to: 1) Outline what

the SPE should contain, and; 2) Provide recommendations for a roadmap on implementing the SPE over the next few years. An SPE Taskforce (SHTF) of GPSNR members was set up to guide and advise on the framework development process, including consultations with smallholder members and others.

“Over the past two years, we have had the opportunity to establish a good relationship with the smallholders, whether through virtual means or in person. Initially, I was concerned that when discussing the SPE, the smallholders might be somewhat cautious or hesitant to commit to certain standards. However, to my surprise, they actually welcomed it. This was largely due to their existing familiarity with and appreciation of GPSNR and its processes. The grant played a crucial role in allowing us to develop trust and rapport with the smallholders. As a result, the smallholders were able to communicate the idea [of the SPE] to their peers.”

Yeo Si Yuan, GPSNR



Rubber tapping in Indonesia

The first step was to create an initial draft of the SPE, based on the HCVN's review of the GPSNR, CPF and other sectoral frameworks for smallholders, notably the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil's Independent Smallholder Standard. The SHTF approved most of the content, but fed back that the format and language needed to be adapted to be suitable for smallholder members.

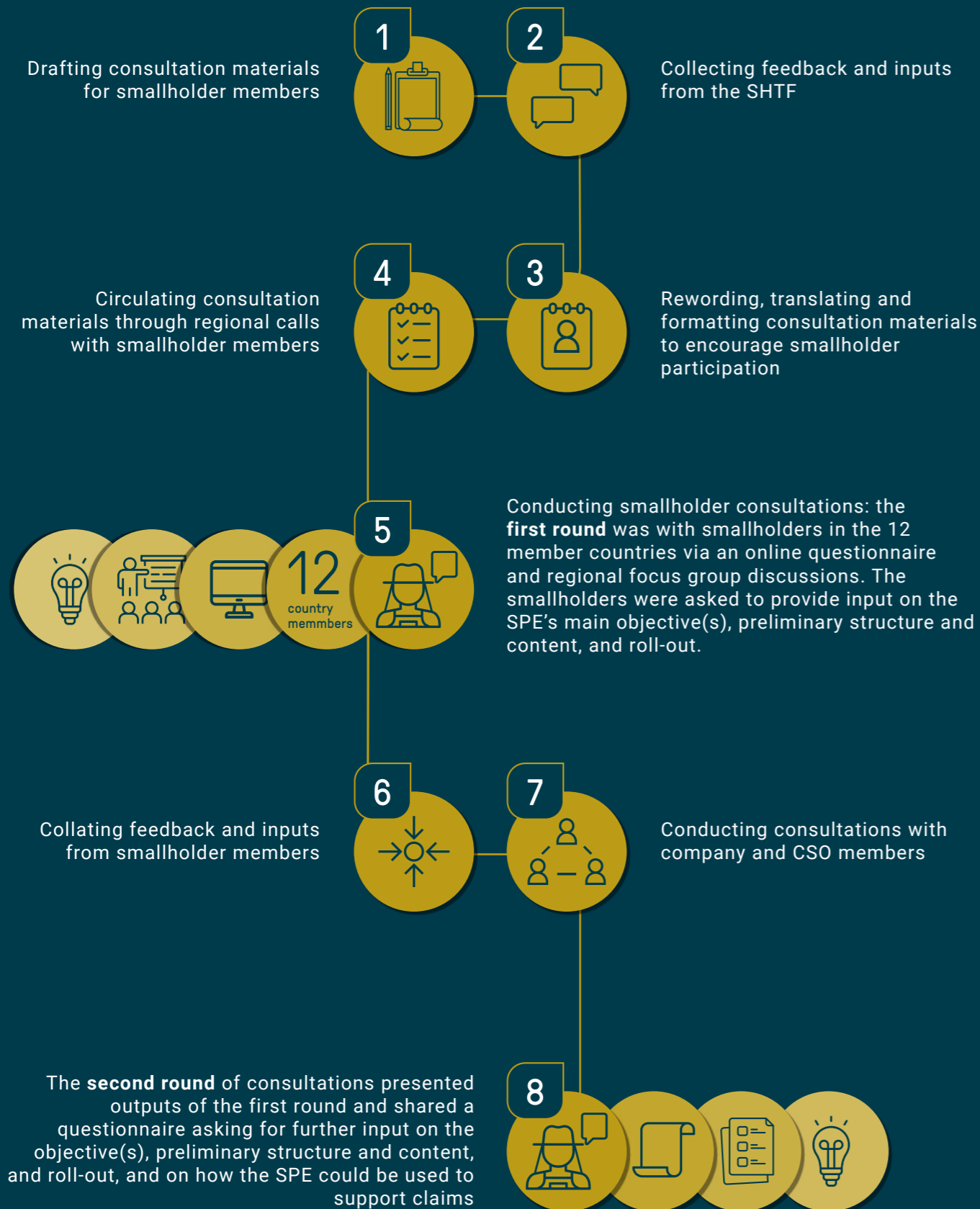
The taskforce then conducted several rounds of consultation to build familiarity with and redraft sections of the SPE, seeking inputs from both smallholder members and other member categories. In parallel, the consultations were used to get input on the objectives and function of the SPE.

“When we took [the initial draft] to the [SHTF], their immediate reaction was that it wasn't speaking the appropriate language. I don't just mean the specific terms used in the commitments, but also the overall presentation. It was clear that the draft wouldn't resonate with smallholders, making it difficult to secure their buy-in. We needed to consider how we present the information in a way that is more tailored to smallholders. This involved understanding their priorities, reorganizing the information, and simplifying the structure of the main commitment groups.”

Olivia Scholtz, HCVN



Consultation process



There were 19 responses to the smallholder online questionnaire, from Thailand, Cote d'Ivoire and Indonesia. The two focus group discussions gathered feedback from 51 smallholders via facilitators and country champions who are members of the GPSNR Smallholder Working Group and act as regional points of contact.

The company and CSO-focused questionnaire was completed by 27 members (eight manufacturers, eight processors, five CSOs, and six affiliate members). Sixteen other GPSNR members provided input via two focus group discussions.

“I’m the president of an association that represents women from Cote d’Ivoire who produce natural rubber. I had several meetings with these women, and when I spoke to GPSNR I gave their opinion. So, it’s their opinion that I’m conveying when I participate in these [consultation] meetings.”

Jacqueline N’guessan Akissi, GPSNR smallholder member in Cote d’Ivoire

“One of the challenges we faced was the remote and virtual nature of the consultation process. In an ideal situation, it would have been beneficial to have more outreach efforts. During the smallholder consultations, a significant portion of our time was spent on explaining the importance of the policy, discussing its content, and highlighting the benefits it can bring. Physical engagement is always preferable over virtual interactions. The fact that we couldn’t conduct physical workshops was a concern. However, we were aware from the beginning that the opportunities for physical workshops might be limited.”



The SPE framework commitments

The HCVN used the consultation feedback to make recommendations on the applicability, objectives and content of the SPE. The GPSNR CPF, directed at private sector, non-smallholder members,

includes 12 Principles of Sustainable Natural Rubber. The draft SPE contains four commitments for smallholder members, with exact wording subject to change:

The next step is for the SHTF to discuss and make final decisions on the text, which may involve modifying or removing content. In summer 2023, the GPSNR Smallholder and Capacity Building Working Group and GPSNR members will review and, if they agree, endorse the SPE and it will be submitted to the Executive Committee for approval. Members will vote on the final proposed

text at the GPSNR General Assembly, scheduled for late 2023.

While the SPE is globally applicable, it will need to be contextualised for each region to provide tailored materials that will help both existing and new members to understand the SPE and its implications, especially during the phase-in process.

CPF PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RUBBER

SPE COMMITMENTS





Open questions and next steps for the SPE roll-out

Once the SPE is voted on and committed to by GPSNR members, a roadmap will be developed to lay out the practical implementation steps and to provide answers to some remaining open questions.

One of the key challenges is around the applicability and scaling of the SPE. Initially, it will apply only to GPSNR smallholder members. However, discussions are underway to explore how other membership categories, such as producers, processors and traders, could use the policy to engage with their smallholder suppliers. In terms of scalability, the SPE will only have a significant impact and raise standards across the entire supply chain if it can be successfully applied to the millions of smallholders involved in rubber production worldwide. This expanded implementation would require significant upstream monitoring and reporting by stakeholders along the rubber value chain. The GPSNR Secretariat sees the best case scenario as a processing company being able to confidently state that all its smallholders, whether they are members or not, are actively working towards complying with the GPSNR policy framework as a baseline.

As part of this, it will be important to communicate to smallholders the benefits of complying with the commitments. While GPSNR is not a pricing body, achieving better livelihoods through traceable, sustainable rubber is a key concern for smallholders.

“The development of the GPSNR smallholder policy cannot be compared to a standard designed for smallholders seeking certification, which often comes with the advantage of a higher price for certified products. This process required smallholder members to take a leap of faith by making commitments without knowing all the benefits they would receive (beyond capacity building) or how these benefits would be realized.”

Olivia Scholtz, HCVN

Another step involves creating tailored guidance for smallholders on applying the commitments, such as what it means in practice for smallholders in Indonesia to protect healthy ecosystems. This requires determining the tools and processes involved and ensuring contextualization to make the global commitment locally relevant.

In the future, the GPSNR SPE might be incorporated into membership forms for new smallholder members. There will also be a parallel process to sensitise existing members, who did not have to commit to any particular practices when they first joined the platform.

The specific reporting requirements are still under consideration, and reporting requirements for smallholders will need to be simplified and focussed on making the initial commitment and demonstrating progress.



“GPSNR has given me Good Agricultural Practice training, to teach about how to fight diseases of rubber trees and how to plant and harvest most effectively. That is the support. That is not money support, but knowledge support.”

Febrius Wibisana, GPSNR smallholder member in Indonesia

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Recommendations

The process of creating the GPSNR SPE and involving smallholder members in its development has provided valuable insights and recommendations for actors in the rubber supply chain, as well as actors involved in other commodities seeking to make their supply chains more sustainable:

- **Building trust:** if there is an opportunity, face-to-face meetings with smallholders can be vital for helping build trust, rapport, and ensure buy-in.
- **Creating a level playing field:** before seeking feedback on specific text, it is important to make sure smallholder members understand the purpose of the initiative and what it means for them, including their right to vote and to reject changes. This can also create a sense of duty to provide constructive feedback and helps to ensure the final output is seen as legitimate.
- **Taking a bottom-up approach:** engaging smallholders throughout the development process helps to ensure that the policy takes smallholders' needs and constraints into account, and is both ambitious and achievable. It needs to work for smallholders and meet the needs of the value chain to become more sustainable.
- **Tailoring communication:** beyond translating the text, language, format and presentation styles need to be adapted for smallholders. The content needs to be presented in a way that speaks to smallholders, in order to ensure their buy-in.
- **Finding communicators:** active smallholder members, country champions and local governments can be powerful in conveying what the policy entails and the benefits of adhering to the commitments, and in sharing practical tips for implementation.

The GPSNR SPE development process has engaged smallholders, companies and CSOs throughout. This has helped promote inclusivity and ensure that the policy is relevant for all actors involved. While more work is needed to articulate the benefits of the new policy, it is expected that the framework will drive positive change in the rubber industry by improving the living conditions of smallholder farmers and ensuring the long-term viability of rubber production.



References

Muhammad Fadzli Ali, Ammar Abdul Aziz, Siti Hawa Sulong, **The role of decision support systems in smallholder rubber production: Applications, limitations and future directions**, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compag.2020.105442>

Reuters, **Comment: Why are rubber companies keeping investors in the dark over deforestation risk?**, 25 May 2023

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