

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

UNDP Independent accountability mechanism: The Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU) and the Stakeholder Response Mechanism (SRM)

This profile was prepared using publicly available sources and reviewed by the Agency for accuracy prior to publication.

*The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), established in 1965, is the UN's development agency focused on reducing poverty through sustainable development. Headquartered in New York, it operates through Country Offices in over 177 countries, supporting projects implemented either directly or through partners such as governments, UN agencies, NGOs, and companies. **UNDP's independent accountability mechanism (UNDP AM)** consists of two parts: the **Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU)** and the **Stakeholder Response Mechanism (SRM)**, both operational since January 2015. SECU, based within the Office of Audit and Investigations at Headquarters, conducts compliance reviews in response to complaints submitted to them and issues advisory notes following investigation of eligible cases. SRM is based within the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS) and has primarily two functions: responding to complaints using independent dispute resolution, and building Country Office capacity to establish their own grievance handling mechanisms .^{1 2}*

STANDARDS AND SAFEGUARDS

The **UNDP Social and Environmental Standards (SES)**, together with the **Social and Environmental Screening Procedure (SESP)** and other policy commitments, establish UNDP's internal benchmarks for sustainable development, human rights, environmental protection, and social responsibility. The SES address key areas such as environmental sustainability—including biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and pollution prevention—and social sustainability, encompassing human rights, gender equality, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples. They also cover displacement and resettlement, community health and safety, and stakeholder engagement.

While specifically tailored to UNDP's operational context, the SES are grounded in international norms and frameworks, including core human rights treaties, the **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**, safeguard standards of multilateral development banks, and global environmental agreement.³

LAND TENURE

Land tenure rights and related grievances—such as issues of ownership, access, use, eviction, or displacement—fall explicitly within the scope of **UNDP's accountability mechanism**. These matters are primarily addressed under **Standard 5: Displacement and Resettlement** of the **UNDP Social and**

¹ UNDP. n.d. Our mission, our goals, our mandate. <https://www.undp.org/about-us>

² UNDP. 2024. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit and Stakeholder Response Mechanism.

https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-09/secu_brochure_eng_web%20%282%29.pdf

³ UNDP. 2021. Social and environmental standards. https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke446/files/2025-02/undp-social-and-environmental-standards_2019-update_rev-2023.pdf

Environmental Standards (SES). This standard applies to any UNDP-supported activity that may result in physical or economic displacement due to land or resource acquisition, restrictions on access or use, or other project-related impacts such as pollution or biodiversity loss. It also covers anticipated or associated displacement and requires that projects avoid or minimize involuntary resettlement, while recognizing legitimate land tenure rights, including informal or customary claims.

When Indigenous Peoples are involved or affected, **Standard 6** also applies and must be read in conjunction with Standard 5 to ensure appropriate protections, including the right to **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**.

Both the **Stakeholder Response Mechanism (SRM)** and the **Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU)** are mandated to address land tenure-related grievances linked to UNDP-supported activities.⁴ Remedies may include the restoration of land or resource access, compensation for losses, livelihood restoration, and, in cases involving Indigenous Peoples, confirmation that FPIC has been properly obtained. If FPIC has not been secured, this may result in project revision, the implementation of corrective actions, or the suspension of relevant activities.

OUTREACH AND ADMISSIBILITY

The **UNDP Accountability Mechanism (AM)**—which includes the **SRM** and **SECU**—raises awareness of its services through a variety of channels. Transparency and accessibility are promoted via the SECU and SRM websites, which outline their respective mandates, procedures, and instructions for filing complaints.⁵ Regular outreach is conducted both in person and virtually, offering one-on-one engagement opportunities with civil society and communities, as well as updates shared through social media platforms. SECU has also developed a multilingual outreach video explaining its mission and the complaint process.^{6 7}

The SRM organizes capacity development activities on the Mechanism and publicizes a range of informational materials, seminars, and webinars.^{8 9 10} In addition, **UNDP Country Offices** are responsible for raising awareness about SECU and the SRM by training staff and partners, providing clear contact information online, distributing culturally and linguistically appropriate materials, and ensuring that project teams regularly confirm that affected communities understand how to access the Mechanism.

Both the SRM and SECU accept complaints from any individual, group, or authorized representative who is—or may be—adversely affected by a UNDP-supported project. Submissions must describe

⁴ UNDP. 2021. Social and environmental standards. https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke446/files/2025-02/undp-social-and-environmental-standards_2019-update_rev-2023.pdf

⁵ SECU. n.d. www.undp.org/secu

⁶ SECU. 2023. Annual report. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-05/Annual%20Report%202023_ENG.pdf

⁷ UNDP. n.d. Checklists for Implementing the SRM in a CO. <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke446/files/2024-02/Draft%20Checklist%20for%20Implementing%20the%20SRM%20in%20a%20CO.docx>

⁸ UNDP. n.d. Capacity Development <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/capacity-development>

⁹ UNDP. n.d. Outreach and Communications. <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/outreach-and-communications>

¹⁰ UNDP. n.d. SES Webinar Series. <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/webinars>

actual or potential adverse social or environmental impacts and, where possible, reference the relevant UNDP standards or policy commitments.^{11 12}

SECU and SRM exclude complaints that are anonymous (although confidentiality may be requested), fraudulent or malicious (unless they raise valid concerns), or fall outside their respective mandates.^{13 14} Excluded matters include issues related to procurement, employment, fraud, or corruption, which are handled by other UNDP units. Complaints are also considered ineligible if UNDP is no longer responsible for the project, or if they repeat earlier submissions without presenting new information. Additionally, SECU excludes complaints involving alleged individual crimes, which are referred to the appropriate authorities. All services provided by SECU and SRM are free of charge.

FILING A COMPLAINT

In contrast to **SECU**, which allows for direct submission without requiring prior attempts at resolution, the **SRM** is designed as a “third-line” support mechanism. Complainants must first raise their concerns locally—either through the project’s grievance redress mechanism, by engaging directly with the Implementing Partner or UNDP staff, or through the **Country Office SRM**. If the Country Office is unable to address the concern fairly or effectively, the complaint may then be escalated to the **UNDP Accountability Mechanism (AM)** at UNDP Headquarters.¹⁵

Complaints can be submitted to either mechanism via mail, email, or messaging applications. The UNDP AM accepts submissions in any language, with translation support provided as needed. However, processing times may be extended for submissions in rare or local languages.¹⁶ If a complaint qualifies for both the SRM and SECU, complainants will be informed and may choose to proceed through the SRM, SECU, or both mechanisms.¹⁷

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

UNDP’s independent accountability mechanism offers two distinct pathways for addressing project-related grievances.

The **SECU** conducts compliance reviews in response to complaints alleging that UNDP has not adhered to its social and environmental commitments. These reviews assess whether UNDP has fulfilled its obligations and whether any actual or potential harm has resulted from non-compliance.¹⁸

¹¹ UNDP. 2014. Stakeholder Response Mechanism. Overview and Guidance.

[https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20\(R%20Rev%202009%20June\).pdf](https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20(R%20Rev%202009%20June).pdf)

¹² Paragraph 23. UNEP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

¹³ UNDP. 2014. Stakeholder Response Mechanism. Overview and Guidance.

[https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20\(R%20Rev%202009%20June\).pdf](https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20(R%20Rev%202009%20June).pdf)

¹⁴ Paragraph 38. UNEP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

¹⁵ UNDP. 2014. Stakeholder Response Mechanism. Overview and Guidance.

[https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20\(R%20Rev%202009%20June\).pdf](https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20(R%20Rev%202009%20June).pdf)

¹⁶ Paragraph 25. UNDP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

¹⁷ Paragraph 31. UNDP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

¹⁸ In addition to complaint-based investigations, SECU may initiate a compliance review on its own initiative where there are credible indications of significant actual or potential harm resulting from possible non-compliance with UNDP’s social and environmental commitments (SECU Investigation Guidelines, 2017).

The **SRM** facilitates voluntary, collaborative problem-solving between the complainant, UNDP project teams, affected stakeholders, and other project actors. Its primary objective is to identify sustainable and satisfactory solutions to the issues raised in the complaint. The process is non-adjudicative in nature and ensures that all parties—including the complainant, UNDP Country Office, and project-level teams—have an active role in determining the outcome.¹⁹

Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU)

Once a complaint is registered and deemed eligible under the compliance review process, the SECU drafts Terms of Reference (ToR) within 20 business days, outlining the scope, methodology, and timeline of the investigation. Stakeholders—including complainants and relevant UNDP staff—may review and comment on the ToR, which may be amended as necessary.

SECU conducts the investigation using international best practices, such as interviews, document reviews, and, where appropriate, site visits. If delays occur, stakeholders are notified, and significant delays are recorded in the Case Registry.

Before finalizing its report, SECU shares the factual sections with the complainant(s) and relevant UNDP units to confirm accuracy and completeness, without disclosing conclusions or recommendations. Once the draft report—including findings and recommendations—is approved by the Director of the Office of Audit and Investigations (OAI), it is published for a 20-day public comment period.

After incorporating relevant feedback, SECU finalizes the report and submits it to the UNDP Administrator, along with its findings and recommendations. The Administrator issues a written decision outlining the actions, if any, that UNDP will take to ensure compliance and address any harm. This decision is shared with all relevant stakeholders and published in the Case Registry, including explanations for any recommendations that are not adopted, where applicable.

Possible outcomes of a SECU compliance review include revising project activities or screening documents, issuing project-specific or organization-wide recommendations, and, in cases of imminent harm, suspending financial disbursements until compliance is achieved. In severe cases, the UNDP Administrator may permanently terminate project funding. The Administrator may also adopt measures to prevent, mitigate, or remedy harm—working with partners to restore affected individuals or the environment to their pre-harm condition. Remedies may include financial compensation (where feasible), restoration of rights, access to rehabilitation services, or formal acknowledgments such as official apologies. Project benefits may be extended to individuals who were wrongly excluded or adversely affected.²⁰

SECU is responsible for monitoring the implementation of approved corrective actions, remedies, or institutional reforms. This process involves stakeholder engagement, review of progress reports, and verification that the required measures have been effectively carried out. Once SECU determines that all agreed actions have been implemented—or that no further monitoring is required, such as when a

¹⁹ UNDP. 2024. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit and Stakeholder Response Mechanism.

https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-09/secu_brochure_eng_web%20%28%29.pdf

²⁰ Paragraph 55. UNDP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

project is cancelled—it formally closes the case. A closure notice is published in the Case Registry, documenting the outcome and marking the official conclusion of the compliance review process.²¹

Stakeholder Response Mechanism (HQ SRM)

The SRM supports project-affected stakeholders, UNDP Country Offices (COs), project teams, governments, and partners in resolving concerns when previous engagement—through the Implementing Partner, CO SRM, or project-level grievance redress mechanisms—has not been successful. While CO-level SRMs and project-level grievance mechanisms are management tools embedded in UNDP operations, the HQ SRM is part of the UNDP Accountability Mechanism (AM) and operates independently of UNDP operations.

The HQ SRM offers independent facilitation, mediation, and other collaborative problem-solving services to help parties address disputes on a voluntary basis.²² Upon receiving a complete request, the SRM office acknowledges receipt within three business days and completes the eligibility assessment within 15 business days. If a request is incomplete, it is returned within three days along with a request for the missing information. Eligibility is typically determined within five business days of receiving a complete submission.

Once a request is deemed eligible, SRM designs a collaborative problem-solving process in consultation with the complainant, the relevant UNDP Country Office, project teams, and any other stakeholders necessary to ensure effective dialogue. Where required, SRM contracts independent mediators or facilitators to manage the process.

If the parties reach an agreement that resolves the complaint, SRM monitors the implementation of the agreement and closes the case once implementation is complete. If the process does not result in an agreement, SRM closes the case and works with the parties to ensure they are informed of alternative options, including the possibility of referring the complaint to SECU.

SRM formally closes each case by documenting outcomes, confirming resolution where applicable, compiling public statistics, and establishing a monitoring plan that includes at least annual reporting. Final documentation is published on the SRM website.²³

Both SECU and SRM promote transparency through regular public updates and access to case information. SECU shares relevant documents and decisions with all involved parties and maintains a public Case Registry²⁴ with ongoing updates. SRM tracks key steps through its internal case management system and publishes aggregate data on complaints and outcomes.²⁵ Both mechanisms protect the confidentiality of complainants when requested.

²¹ Paragraphs 56-65. UNDP. 2022. Investigation guidelines. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit.

http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SECU%20Investigation%20Guidelines_4%20August%202017.pdf

²² UNDP. 2024. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit and Stakeholder Response Mechanism.

https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-09/secu_brochure_eng_web%20%282%29.pdf

²³ UNDP. 2014. Stakeholder Response Mechanism. Overview and Guidance.

[https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20\(R%20Rev%202009%20June\).pdf](https://info.undp.org/sites/bpps/SES_Toolkit/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/Stakeholder%20Response%20Mechanism%20-%20Overview%20and%20Guidance%20(R%20Rev%202009%20June).pdf)

²⁴ UNDP. N.d. Social and Environmental Compliance Unit - Case Registry <https://secu.info.undp.org/>

²⁵ UNDP. N.d. Stakeholder Response Mechanism - Case Registry. <https://srm.info.undp.org/>