

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

Stakeholder Response Mechanism (SRM)

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Established in 1972, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) supports global environmental governance by promoting low-carbon, resource-efficient development, safeguarding ecosystems, and providing science-based policy guidance. UNEP works with 193 Member States and a network of partners, including UN agencies, civil society, and the private sector. UNEP's formal accountability system is the Stakeholder Response Mechanism (SRM), managed by the Independent Office for Stakeholder Safeguard-related Response (IOSSR) within the Corporate Services Division (CSD). The Director of CSD currently serves as the interim Head of IOSSR and reports directly to the UNEP Executive Director. The SRM offers a transparent, structured process for individuals or communities affected by UNEP-supported projects to raise complaints and seek resolution.¹

STANDARDS AND SAFEGUARDS

UNEP's **Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework (ESSF)** sets out institution-specific safeguards aligned with its environmental mandate. The framework addresses environmental and social risk management, human rights, gender equality, social inclusion, and stakeholder engagement throughout the project lifecycle. While tailored to UNEP's operational context, the ESSF is grounded in international best practices, including the **UN Common Approach to Environmental and Social Standards** and the **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights**.²

LAND TENURE

Land tenure issues—including ownership, access, use, eviction, and displacement—fall within the scope of UNEP's SRM. **Standards 6 and 7** of the **ESSF** specifically address land tenure, resource access, Indigenous Peoples' rights, and forced resettlement. The ESSF draws on international benchmarks, notably the **Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT)**, which emphasize recognition of customary rights, the principle of **Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)**, and protection against forced eviction.

The ESSF prioritizes the avoidance of displacement. Where displacement is unavoidable, it requires mitigation measures and fair compensation at full replacement cost, along with transitional support and development assistance aimed at restoring or improving livelihoods and living standards beyond pre-displacement levels.

¹ UNEP. 2021. UNEP's Stakeholder Response Mechanism.

<https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/32023/ESSFRM.pdf?sequence=13>

² UNEP. 2020. UNEP Environmental and social sustainability framework (ESSF). <https://wedocs.unep.org/items/e428255f-06d8-4882-8920-4d7aeb0b706c>

Affected persons must have secure access to housing, services, and resources, including safeguards for individuals without formal land titles. For **Indigenous Peoples**, Standard 7 provides additional protections, including a requirement to obtain FPIC prior to any relocation or changes in land use. Remedies may include the legal recognition of customary tenure, restoration of access to land and resources, and culturally appropriate benefit-sharing arrangements.

OUTREACH AND ADMISSIBILITY

While UNEP does not operate a dedicated outreach programme for the SRM, basic information is available on its website, including a public case registry. Additionally, UNEP's ESSF requires that stakeholders be informed of available grievance redress mechanisms as part of project-level stakeholder engagement.³ To be considered admissible, a complaint must meet the following criteria:

- Relate to an activity currently being implemented under a UNEP project or programme;
- Be submitted by, or on behalf of, individuals or communities who are allegedly affected;
- Be directly linked to UNEP's ESSF;
- Raise concerns about actual or potential non-compliance with the ESSF (for compliance review cases); and
- Not duplicate a prior complaint on the same issue, unless new evidence or changed circumstances are presented.

Complaints may address both **compliance** and **grievance redress** issues under the ESSF. Matters falling outside the mechanism's scope—such as allegations of administrative misconduct or financial mismanagement—are referred to appropriate UNEP or UN oversight bodies. All SRM services are provided free of charge.

FILING A COMPLAINT

Any individual or group who believes they are, or may be, adversely affected by UNEP-supported activities may submit a complaint to the SRM, provided that local grievance mechanisms have been exhausted or found to be ineffective. The SRM is intended to complement, not replace, these local processes. Anonymous complaints are not accepted, but complainants may request that their identities be kept confidential. Complaints may be submitted via the online **Project Concern Form** (available in six UN languages in both web and PDF formats), by email, or by regular mail.⁴

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The SRM offers two distinct pathways for addressing concerns: **dispute resolution**, which focuses on collaboratively resolving project-related grievances, and **compliance review**, which investigates alleged non-compliance with UNEP's ESSF.

Once a complaint is received, the Independent Office for Stakeholder Safeguard-related Response (IOSSR) acknowledges receipt within ten business days and completes an eligibility assessment within thirty business days. If the complaint is found eligible, it proceeds to either dispute resolution,

³ Paragraph 72. UNEP. 2020. UNEP environmental and social sustainability framework (ESSF). <https://wedocs.unep.org/items/e428255f-06d8-4882-8920-4d7aeb0b706c>

⁴ UNEP. n.d. UNEP project concern. <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/why-does-un-environment-matter/un-environment-project-concern>

compliance review, or both, depending on the issues raised and the preferences of the complainant. In cases deemed ineligible, IOSSR refers the matter to the appropriate UNEP or UN body for follow-up.

If the **dispute resolution pathway** is selected, IOSSR collaborates with the complainant to develop a response plan that outlines the steps to address the grievance, assigns responsibilities, and sets a timeline for implementation. This plan is shared with the relevant UNEP staff and published in the public case registry. IOSSR or accredited third-party experts may facilitate the process. Participation in dispute resolution is entirely voluntary and can only proceed with the informed consent of all parties.

The process continues as long as it remains constructive and all parties are engaged. It concludes either when the issue is resolved, the process becomes unproductive, or one or more parties withdraw. The outcomes of the process—whether resolved, partially resolved, or unresolved—are documented and, subject to consent, made publicly available. Complainants may still request a compliance review later.

Within twenty-five business days of completing the dispute resolution process, IOSSR issues a final report to the UNEP Executive Director, shares it with the complainant, and publishes it online. Unless otherwise agreed, IOSSR monitors the implementation of any agreements or commitments on an annual basis and provides progress updates until all actions are fully implemented.

If the **compliance review pathway** is pursued, IOSSR prepares draft Terms of Reference (ToR) within twenty business days of confirming eligibility. The ToR outlines the scope, methodology, and expected timeline for the investigation. Stakeholders are given ten business days to review and comment on the draft before it is finalized. The compliance review is then carried out by IOSSR or accredited experts and may include interviews, document reviews, and site visits as necessary. A draft report that includes findings, recommendations, and a proposed monitoring plan is published for a twenty-business-day public comment period. Following the close of this period, IOSSR finalizes the report within twenty-five business days, submits it to the UNEP Executive Director, shares it with the complainant, and makes it publicly available.

Within twenty-five business days of receiving the final compliance review report, the Executive Director decides on any corrective or mitigation measures, informs the complainant of the decision, and ensures the decision is published. IOSSR is responsible for monitoring the implementation of any required actions, publishing progress updates annually until all corrective measures have been completed.