

RSPO

Roundtable on
Sustainable Palm Oil



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RSPO ASSURANCE FORUM 5

Conducted virtually on 28 June 2022

RSPO

RSPO Assurance Forum 5
28 June 2022

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Disclaimer: All the information presented in this report was deemed correct at the time the forum was held.

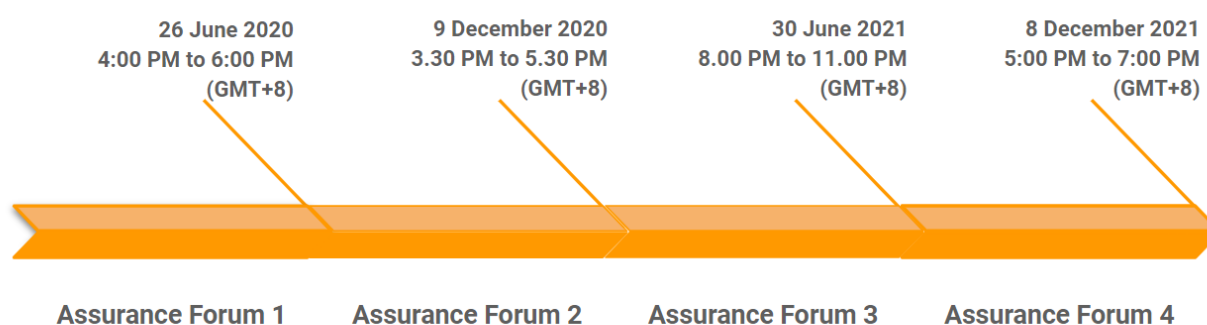


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ASC	Assurance Standing Committee
ASI	Assurance Services International
CB	Certification Body
HRWG	Human Rights Working Group
ISH	Independent Smallholder
P&C	Principles and Criteria
RSPO	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
SSC	Standard Standing Committee

The RSPO Assurance Forum is a bi-annual event conducted by the RSPO Secretariat with the support of the Assurance Standing Committee (ASC). The objective of the forum is to provide an open platform for constructive dialogue between the Secretariat, the ASC, RSPO Members as well as non-RSPO members. Each forum will carry different themes to discuss various assurance-related topics to contribute towards the improvement of the RSPO Assurance System. So far, the forums had been held virtually to maximise participation of stakeholders from different time zones. The following is a list of past Assurance Forums:



Details of the recently concluded **Assurance Forum 5**, which this report will discuss in detail are as follows:

- Date: 28 June 2022
- Time: 4:00 PM to 6:00 PM. (GMT+8)
- Venue: Virtual meeting via Zoom (link: <https://zoom.us/j/97942449366>)
- Recordings: Available upon request via the Secretariat

RSPO Assurance Forum 5 on 28 June 2022 focused on the theme, “**Strengthening Audit Methodology Post-Pandemic**”. Moving away from its regular format, the forum involved two discussion sessions which required active participation from the attendees. Participants were divided into four breakout rooms to discuss two topics; the first on “Best Practices to Enhance Remote Audit” and the second on “Improving Auditing Skills to Promote Confidentiality and Confidence in Data”. Below is the agenda for the two hour forum.

Time	Item	Topic	PIC
4:00 PM.	1.0	Welcome Remarks	Agus Purnomo (Co-Chair, ASC)
		RSPO Antitrust Guidelines	Bilge Daldeniz (Independent Lead, ASC)
4:05 PM.	2.0	Updates from the Secretariat	Zaidee Tahir (Integrity Manager, RSPO)
4:10 PM	3.0	Setting the Scene: <i>Strengthening Audit Methodology Post Pandemic</i>	Aryo Gustomo (Deputy Director, Compliance, RSPO)
4:15 PM	4.0	Discussion 1: <i>Best Practices to Enhance Remote Audit</i>	Facilitated Session by RSPO and ASC Independent Lead
4:55 PM	Break		
5:05 PM	5.0	Discussion 2: <i>Improving Auditing Skills to Promote Confidentiality and Confidence in Data</i>	Facilitated Session by RSPO and ASC Independent Lead
5:50 PM	6.0	Summary of Discussions	Bilge Daldeniz (Independent Lead, ASC)
		Closing Remarks	Kamal Seth (Co-Chair, ASC)

Participants

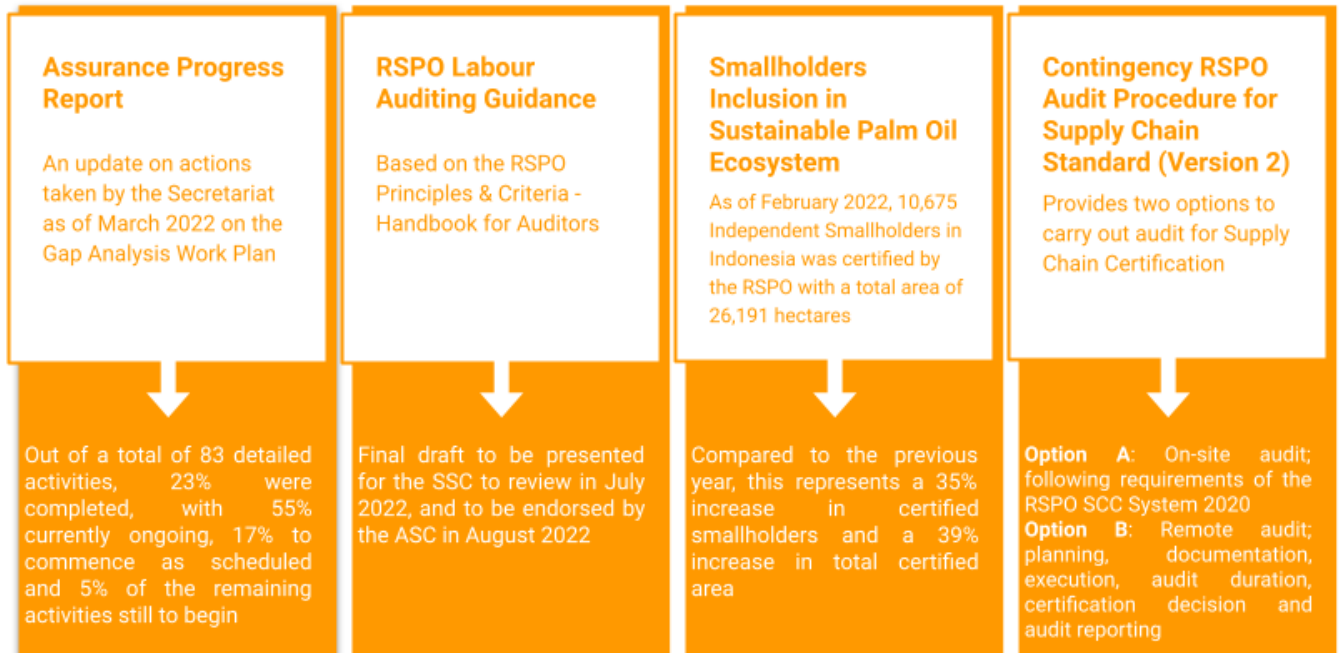
The forum was attended by 46 participants from the Secretariat, the Proforest (Independent Lead for the ASC), representatives from RSPO service providers, members and non-RSPO members. The full list of participants are as follows:

Participants	
Name	Organisation
Agus Purnomo	Golden Agri Resources (ASC Co-Chair)
Kamal Seth	WWF Singapore (ASC Co-Chair)
Hugo Byrnes	Royal Ahold Delhaize N.V (ASC member)
Lee Kuan-Chun	P&G (ASC member)
Mariama Diallo	SIAT Group (ASC member)
Paul Wolvekamp	Both ENDS (ASC member)
Vivi Anita	Musim Mas (ASC member)
William Siow	IOI (ASC member)
Amalia Falah Alam	CNV International (HRWG member)
Laila Winfred	Cargill (HRWG member)
Rebecca Armson	Goodhope (HRWG member)
Librian Angraeni	Musim Mas (SSC member)
Matthias Wilnhammer	ASI
Aernida Abdul Kadir	SIRIM QAS
Aline Brewitz	GUTcert
Arie Soetjadi	HCVN
Bart W van Assen	KAYON
Dian S Soeminta	TUV Rheinland
Dita Galina	Musim Mas
Francis Binang	SIAT Group

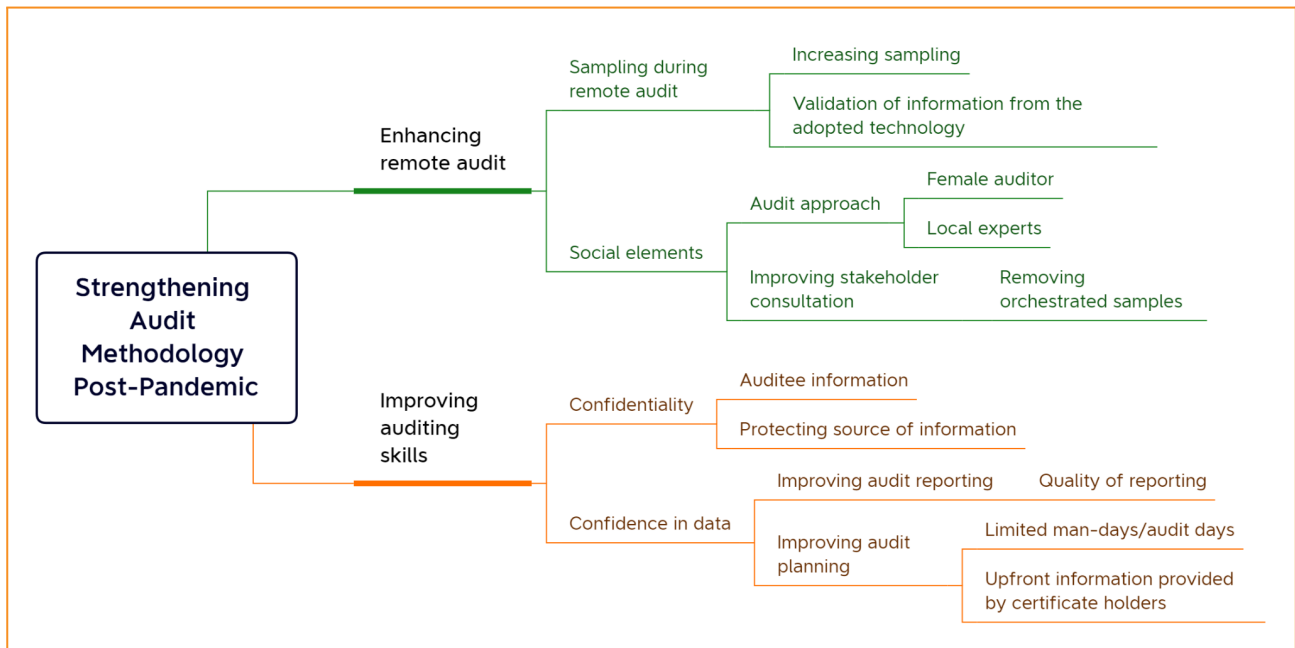
Hendra Fachrurozy	TUV Rheinland
Jamie Tang	Bureau Veritas
Janie Chin Hsien Yeen	Monash University
Kamini Sooriamoorthy	SIRIM QAS
Karya Rizki	Sawitku Masa Depan (SAMADE)
Natasha Mahendran	Effem
Rebecca Armson	Goodhope
Ruth Silva	HCVN
Yohannes Ryan	Freelance Auditor
Yugeswaran Muthaiah	Control Union
Ali Merifield	Proforest (ASC Independent Lead)
Bilge Daldeniz	Proforest (ASC Independent Lead)
Claire Reboah	Proforest (ASC Independent Lead)
Shinta Puspitasari	Proforest (ASC Independent Lead)
Ahmad Amirul Ariff	RSPO Secretariat
Amanina Zahir	RSPO Secretariat
Aryo Gustomo	RSPO Secretariat
Freda Manan	RSPO Secretariat
Hanib Libon	RSPO Secretariat
Hanisah Aziz	RSPO Secretariat
Leena Ghosh	RSPO Secretariat
Nadia Nasir	RSPO Secretariat
Prasad Segaran	RSPO Secretariat
Shazaley Abdullah	RSPO Secretariat
Wan Muqtadir	RSPO Secretariat
Zaidee Tahir	RSPO Secretariat

Updates from the Secretariat

The forum started with opening remarks from Agus Purnomo, Co-Chair of the ASC who welcomed the participants and explained the new format of the forum. Following that, Zaidee Tahir, Integrity Manager from the RSPO's Assurance Division gave an update on ongoing assurance-related activities in the Secretariat. Details of the updates are provided below.



To help participants understand the theme and discussions that will be conducted in the forum, Aryo Gustomo, RSPO's Deputy Director of Compliance, presented and explained the following mind map:



Restrictions during the pandemic caused some audits to be postponed while others had to be done remotely. As the world adjusts to the current period, several processes in certification have had to be adapted as well. While auditors are mostly able to resume with on-site audits, there are still a number of situations in which remote audits become the only option available. This presents the need to explore solutions for better audit methodology beyond the pandemic. In order to improve audit methodology in the post-pandemic era, two fundamental aspects have been chosen to be discussed in this forum.

Discussion 1: Best Practices to Enhance Remote Audit

Since remote audits will continue to be carried out, there are high expectations for such audits to remain credible. The Secretariat proposed to uncover best practices in two areas. The first is on sampling and two suggestions were made to increase sampling and validate information from the technology adopted for remote audits. The second is on social elements and the Secretariat suggested the provision of female auditors and local experts where applicable, as well as improving stakeholder consultation by removing orchestrated samples.

Discussion 2: Improving Auditing Skills to Increase Confidentiality and Confidence in Data

The Secretariat proposed to discuss ways to ensure the source of information and auditees' information remain confidential throughout the audit process. To increase confidence in data, the Secretariat suggested looking into improving the quality of audit reporting and audit planning, especially with regard to the limited number of audit days and the provision of information by certificate holders before the audit.

During the discussions, participants were divided into four breakout rooms. Each breakout room was facilitated and the discussions were recorded. To ensure that they had the opportunity to share thoughts with individuals who were different from those in Discussion 1, participants were shuffled for Discussion 2. Details of each breakout room are as follows.

Discussion 1: Breakout Rooms

Breakout	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4
Facilitator	Bilge Daldeniz	Shinta Puspitasari	Claire Reboah	Aryo Gustomo
Recorder	Hanib Libon	Amanina Zahir	Hanisah Aziz	Zaidee Tahir
Assigning Rooms	Wan Muqtadir			
Managing Responses	Freda Manan (exported responses from Mentimeter) Ali Merifield (analysed responses for Summary of Discussions)			
Participants	Aernida Abdul Karim	Amalia Falah Alam	Ali Merifield	Ahmad Amirul Ariff
	Agus Purnomo	Bart W van Assen	Kamini Sooriamoorthy	Arie Soetjadi
	Francis Binang	Dian Soeminta	Laila Wilfred	Hugo Byrnes
	Lee Kuan-Chun	Hendra Fachrurozy	Matthias Wilnhammer	Karya Rizki
	Librian Angraeni	Leena Ghosh	Paul Wolvekamp	Nadia Nasir
	Ruth Silva	Mariama Diallo	Vivi Anita	Rebecca Armson
		Yohannes Ryan	Yugeswaran Muthaiah	Shazaley Abdullah

Discussion 2: Breakout Rooms

Breakout	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4
Facilitator	Bilge Daldeniz	Shinta Puspitasari	Claire Reboah	Aryo Gustomo
Recorder	Hanib Libon	Amanina Zahir	Hanisah Aziz	Zaidee Tahir
Assigning Rooms	Wan Muqtadir			
Managing Responses	Freda Manan (exported responses from Mentimeter) Ali Merifield (analysed responses for Summary of Discussions)			
Participants	Aernida Abdul Karim	Hendra Fachrurozy	Ali Merifield	Agus Purnomo
	Ahmad Amirul Ariff	Lee Kuan-Chun	Amalia Falah Alam	Arie Soetjadi
	Francis Binang	Librian Angraeni	Dian Soeminta	Bart W van Assen
	Mariama Diallo	Nadia Nasir	Hugo Byrnes	Janie Chin
	Rebecca Armson	Shazaley Abdullah	Kamal Seth Paul Wolvekamp	Kamini Sooriamoorthy
	Vivi Anita	Yohannes Ryan	Matthias Wilnhammer	Karya Rizki
	Yugeswaran Muthaiah			Ruth Silva

To start off each discussion, participants were given a code to log into www.menti.com (Mentimeter*) and answer one question. Feedback from the Mentimeter was then used to guide the discussion. Snapshots of participants' responses in Mentimeter are provided below.

*Mentimeter is an audience engagement platform with easy-to-use features such as dynamic word clouds, live and instant polls, entertaining quizzes and interactive Q&As.

Discussion 1: Snapshots from Live Mentimeter Responses

Breakout Room 1

What are some best practices that can enhance remote audit?





Longer days, but limited hours per day. Let's say 5 hours auditing only for 1 day.

Arrange a pre-audit call just to go through tech prep and pic assignments

Limitation to internet is a MAJOR issues where some areas are not with good coverage, hence limiting the interview sessions or LIVE interview.

Improving the list of indicators and method how to collect or measure them

Social indicators


Use of internet, especially video best

Allow auditors to sample last minute so that we have the

Breakout Room 2

What are some best practices that can enhance remote audit?





Thorough desktop research, time for varied stakeholder engagement and on site inspection

Auditors must be prepared to spend sufficient time for conducting audit

Involvement of broad stakeholder

Interview to stakeholders can use phone call;

Auditors contact CSOs to get feedback on the local stakeholders mapping;

Modular or partial audit, not "full version"

Enhance the knowledge of auditors with "investigation" skill including how to

Breakout Room 3

What are some best practices that can enhance remote audit?



enable larger groups (>50) of local stakeholders (workers, community members) also to submit their feedback, views, concerns, suggestions anonymous using an easily accessible (whats-app) tool,

Use remote approaches following a pre-screening of conditions only (focus points of an audit, risks involved, access to stakeholders etc)

Categorisation of audit question from general to depth.

Specific software solutions

Implement training program for remote audit procedure and practices. So auditor can cover social and labor aspects remotely

Breakout Room 4

What are some best practices that can enhance remote audit?



Flexible auditor to adapt changes and handle virtual environment.

Further strengthen the social audit

HP/internet signal amplification at the audit site

Important to get a feeling for what is not visible, so what is the auditor not seeing that he/she should be aware of.

A remote audit can never substitute field audit, so it is very important to clearly articulate what remote audit can cover, what it cannot (scope and limitation). A

strengthening cellphone/internet signal at the audit location

The ID of interviewees

Discussion 1: Full Responses from Mentimeter

Question: What are some best practices that can enhance remote audits?

Note: Some of the language of the responses have been edited to ensure accuracy of messaging while maintaining the intention of the feedback.

Room 1	Allocate more audit days but limited hours per day (for example, only five hours each day).
	Arrange a pre-audit call to go through technical preparation and assign persons in charge (PIC).
	Poor Internet coverage is a major issue in some areas, hence limiting the interview sessions.
	Improving list of indicators and providing methods on how to collect or measure them.
	Allow auditors to conduct last minute sampling for better control.
	Document and validate findings (whether acquired directly or remotely). Declare limitations of methods used (i.e. remote audit). Explicitly state next steps to address the limitations (for eg. if not all relevant parties were engaged).
	Ensure Internet connectivity allows for best video quality.
	Conduct capacity building for local facilitators of remote audits.

Room 2	Conduct thorough desktop research and allocate sufficient time for varied stakeholder engagement and on-site inspections.
	Auditors must be prepared to spend sufficient time to conduct audits.
	Involvement of a broad range of stakeholders.
	Conduct interviews with stakeholders via phone call.
	Auditors contact Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to get feedback on local stakeholders mapping.
	Conduct modular or partial audit, not full version.
	Use a facilitator when conducting remote audits.
	Consultation of draft audit results to selected stakeholders to ensure robust and valid data & information.
	Enhance auditor's knowledge with investigative skills including how to use data on the internet to support findings.

Responses from Mentimeter

Room 2	Use the company's stakeholders list to select people to be interviewed and not let the company choose.
	Far more social background training for auditors, and strict guidance on stakeholder consultation.
	Spend sufficient time for documents review, especially for labour issues.

Room 3	Conduct pre-screening using a risk-based approach.
	Ensure access to stakeholders and willingness or the ability to use remote technology.
	Ensure confidentiality of data when conducting remote audits.
	Be prepared to solve bandwidth and other logistical/practical issues.
	Identify the focus, environmental issues are easier to be monitored remotely but social issues require on-site audits.
	Explore innovative technology that allows local communities to offer concerns, suggestions and feedback.
	Ensure anonymity and sentiment analysis (filter out extremes).
	Remote monitoring of environmental issues can facilitate and make audits cheaper. How or where do we re-invest then?
	Auditor needs to clarify the process and be accessible.
	Access to proper Internet is key so information can flow both ways.
	Solve issues with file sharing as data security policy and firewalls in corporate companies can make it hard.
	Remote audits give opportunity for people (e.g. in plantations) to speak up, where they may not be in a room - to submit info anonymously and securely.
	Need two-way flow of information, to share results and feedback and give assurance to people who took part (they can see result or impact).

Room 4	Auditors need to be flexible to adapt to changes and handle virtual environments.
	Further strengthen the social audit.

Room 4	Internet signal amplification at the audit site.
	Important to get a feeling for what is not visible (what is the auditor not seeing that he/she should be aware of).
	A remote audit can never substitute field audit, so it is very important to clearly articulate what remote audit can cover, what it cannot (scope and limitation). A systematic review would help in identifying weakness and possibilities for improvement.
	Strengthen phone/Internet signal at the audit location.
	Create a specific platform for the remote audit for the benefit of auditors and certificate holders.
	Submit data that demonstrates implementation.

Discussion 2: Snapshots from Live Mentimeter Responses

Breakout Room 1

How can auditing skills be improved to increase confidentiality and confidence in data?



- Usage of shared document platforms
- Facilitator onsite
- Auditor: Check that data sharing and security protocols are GDPR-compliant and restrict access to
- Auditor should have the skills in handling the interview - to ensure auditees feel comfortable and safe for them to share their stories.
- Speak their local languages
- For confidentiality : develop a software/secure platform.
- Have detailed checklist to guide the auditors on what to
- Critical thinking and use of technology

Breakout Room 2

How can auditing skills be improved to increase confidentiality and confidence in data?



- Auditors training on integrity.
- Revamp the syllabus of training to focus more on auditing skills
- Use blockchain technology to protect and segregate data and information
- auditee and CB are agree relate of using cloud platform and i have limiting time to remove all information it for confidentiality issue
- Auditor skills in handling conversations and convincing the auditee to disclose the information with confidence.
- Have a clear policy and procedure for data recording and data removal after audit

Breakout Room 3

How can auditing skills be improved to increase confidentiality and confidence in data?



Use secure share folder to share information/data avoid to use public communication channel, NDA must be signed by both parties. Sample interviewee have to protected by CB also, and ask the CH. Find the best way to get contact of the

Self-reporting by CH can foster audit efficiency and confidence into audit

Breakout Room 4

How can auditing skills be improved to increase confidentiality and confidence in data?



Confidentiality of interviewees can easily be safeguarded by using a coding system separate from audit report, e.g. interviewee A, employee 1, etc.

re confidentiality: as usual, sampling needs to be independent (at least 25% is random) and interviews done without company/auditee presence. Detailed Data to be kept with the CB only.

Confidence in the auditing can be improved by showing how data was triangulated by the auditors, as well as how discrepancies were pursued during the audit.

If remote audit uses a local facilitator,

one person one

Discussion 2: Full Responses from Mentimeter

Question: How can auditing skills be improved to increase confidentiality and confidence in data?

Note: Some of the responses have been edited in the context of language to ensure accuracy of messaging while maintaining the intention of the feedback

Room 1	Ability to communicate in migrant languages.
	Usage of shared document platforms.
	Skills in handling the interview to ensure auditees feel comfortable and safe to share their stories.
	Ability to speak local languages.
	Presence of facilitator at the audit site.
	Have a detailed checklist to guide auditors on what to ask auditees during interview sessions.
	Develop a software/secure platform to increase confidentiality.
	Auditor to check that data sharing and security protocols are GDPR-compliant and restrict access to essential personnel.
	Develop a training programme to improve auditor skill on checking and quality audit reporting.
	Critical thinking and use of technology.
	Ask for documents earlier, before conducting an audit.
	Companies might need to be guided on how to be prepared for remote audits.

Room 2	Auditors training on integrity.
	Revamp training syllabus to focus more on auditing skills.
	Use blockchain technology to protect and segregate data and information.
	When using a cloud platform, auditors may have limited time to remove some information to maintain confidentiality.
	Skilled at handling conversations and convincing the auditee to disclose information with confidence.

Responses from Mentimeter

Room 2	Have a clear policy and procedure for data recording and data removal after audit.
	Conduct interviews outside working hours.
	Better audit plan development prior to audit and conduct document audit prior to field audit.
	Auditors' ability to evaluate the surroundings of the auditees (by asking some verification questions).
	Improving auditing skills not only for confidentiality and confidence in data, collecting and interview shall improve reference to appendix of ISO 19011.

Room 3	Set rules at the outset (e.g. for management to step aside, so workers can be open).
	Since auditors cannot control who is in the room, they need to confirm who is present (may be out of sight during remote call).
	Sampling needs to be large enough to protect sources and be cautious when reporting in order to protect identities.
	Wait to give feedback to the management rather than providing direct feedback after an individual interview.
	Avoid using public communication channels to share info or data, and file sharing.
	Both certificate holders and auditors have to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) as commitment for confidentiality.
	To get interviewees outside companies (e.g. labour unions), need to ensure phone data is not used to identify interviewees (secure data for all beforehand).
	If asking companies to provide contact info, need to get a longer list than needed so interviewees cannot be identified (e.g. 30 phone numbers for 5 interviews).
	Information exchange carries risk such as could be sent somewhere by mistake. Need risk mitigation strategies (e.g. where links used are only accessible by certificate holders and CB.)
	Important to have contact details for local stakeholders in communities/ plantations to ensure access.
Use a secure share folder to share information/data and avoid using a public communication channel. NDA must be signed by both parties. Sample interviewees have to be protected by auditors. Find the best way to get contact with the stakeholders.	

Room 3	May need to prohibit use of some channels that are not secure.
	Self-reporting by certificate holders can foster audit efficiency and confidence in audit.
Room 4	Confidentiality of interviewees can easily be safeguarded by using a coding system separate from audit report (e.g. interviewee A, employee 1 etc.)
	Sampling needs to be independent (at least 25% is random) and interviews should be done without company's/auditee's presence. Detailed data to be kept only with auditors.
	If remote audit uses a local facilitator, training in confidentiality will be necessary for the facilitator.
	Confidence in the auditing can be improved by showing how data was triangulated by the auditors, as well as how discrepancies were pursued during the audit.
	If remote audit uses a local facilitator, training in confidentiality will be necessary for the facilitator.
	Need to emphasise on relevance (of the question asked) to the indicators to increase interviewees' confidence.
	One person one data, auditors interview one person and verify data.

Discussion 1: Best Practices to Enhance Remote Audits

The first discussion aimed to uncover best practices for making remote audits more effective. The responses from all four groups during the first discussion can be categorised into several themes, which are summarised below.



Internet

Internet connectivity is often a limitation, especially when it is necessary to use or send video recordings. Two-way information flow is critical and for this to happen, Internet connection may need to be boosted on the ground to facilitate audit processes.



Technology

Data security concerns, as well as the presence of corporate firewalls, can make file sharing more difficult. Several suggestions were made during the discussion, including developing a specific platform to enable remote audits and reviewing Ulula's Worker Voice* trial to evaluate the applicability of the tool in addressing and improving labour conditions.

**Ulula is a software and analytics platform that engages workers directly and anonymously to facilitate safe and honest feedback and support two-way engagement across global supply chains. In 2019, RSPO and Ulula designed a survey and feedback instrument aligned with the latest RSPO Principles and Criteria (P&C) 2018 Indicators on labour and human rights. It was launched in January 2019 in Lahad Datu, Sabah, within the certified units of RSPO's participating member, WILMAR International.*



Limitations

Remote audits are subject to a number of restrictions. The scope of such audits must therefore be made clear and transparent to both certificate holders and auditors. It was also proposed that when remote audit has to be conducted, it is done as a partial or modular audit instead of a full version. However, it is obvious that social auditing needs to be improved when audits are carried out remotely. A systematic review of remote audits may be beneficial as well to evaluate its effectiveness in detecting non-conformances.



Pre-Audit Assessment

Thorough desktop research conducted prior to audits can help determine the focus of a remote audit, whether it is environmental or social. Additionally, this will aid in defining any technological constraints or opportunities and in locating new or different stakeholders on the ground.



Skill Set

Due to the limitations that are present in remote audits, auditors need to be equipped with a new skill set, particularly adapting to remote and technological platforms and establishing interviewee trust to ensure effective virtual engagements. This may necessitate the development of a new list of indicators and methods for conducting remote audits. Auditors should research the background of units being audited and the potential issues, to be able to look beyond what they are seeing and being told in interviews to ensure the real issues faced on the ground can be uncovered.



Opportunities

Remote technology allows for two-way information flow, which should be fully utilised to gather feedback from those who may not speak up during public stakeholder engagement, and to report back to the local community and share audit results, assuring them that they have been heard. Anonymity and security are critical in the auditing process.

Discussion 2: Improving Auditing Skills to Increase Confidentiality and Confidence in Data

The second discussion centred on how to improve auditing skills in order to boost data confidentiality and confidence. The following key points summarise the discussion points from the four breakout rooms.



Setting Rules

Rules need to be laid out clearly and should include agreement from the management to step aside and allow audits to be conducted independently and interviewees to speak freely. Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) must be signed by both auditors and certificate holders, in addition to agreeing on an audit plan to ensure companies understand how to prepare for the remote audit and are able to share all the necessary documents prior to audits.



Sampling

It is also beneficial for auditors to request a larger list of potential interviewees so that those who are chosen cannot be easily identified. To ensure confidentiality, sampling needs to be independent (at least 25% random), and a coding system may be used to refer to the interviewees.



Technology

To reduce the risk of accidental data breach, a secure channel of communication for calls and information or file-sharing is required. Certain technological or communication platforms may need to be prohibited if security cannot be guaranteed. It was also suggested that an appropriate software that is accessible beyond audit be used to broaden the reach and opportunity to obtain input.



Skill Set

The discussion also emphasised the importance of training auditors on integrity within auditing, evaluating remote environments (where there is limited or no visibility), how to build trust for confidential conversations as well as checking and ensuring quality of reporting.



Data

To ensure data security, there needs to be a clear policy and procedure for recording and removing data after audits. Transparency can be improved by demonstrating how auditors triangulated data and pursued discrepancies during the audit. Auditors also need to ensure that data sharing and security protocols comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and that access is restricted to essential personnel.



Remote Interviews

Auditors need to be able to assess the surroundings when conducting remote interviews to make sure the interviewee is in a secure setting, without the presence of management. There must be a pre-agreed procedure to facilitate translations or interpretations when auditors are unable to communicate in the local dialect or the language of migrants. Additionally, anytime an independent interpreter or facilitator is engaged, it is important to first establish their integrity as well as the security of the information being translated.



Reporting

Self-reporting by certificate holders can foster audit efficiency and confidence into audit. However, auditors should refrain from reporting back directly after interviews to prevent individual responses from being identified.

Remote audit has become part of the new norm in these current times. A spike in Covid-19 infection in certain locations and other restrictions will prohibit companies and auditors from conducting on-site audits. Many suggestions were made by the forum's participants, which were based on their own experiences as auditors and auditees as well as observations from other stakeholders. However, two common themes can be derived from the discussions.



Photo credit: 2021 RSPO/SayanCHUENUDOMSAVA

Technology

Among the major concerns in remote audits is the security of data. This encompasses the whole process from preparations made prior to audits and the subsequent follow-ups after audits are completed. To assist in the preparation and ensuring effectiveness, auditors usually require documents to be shared beforehand. However, some companies may be reluctant to do so for fear of data breach. This presents the need for a platform that can guarantee data that is being shared is kept confidential and used solely for auditing purposes. In addition, remote audits may be able to leverage on data collected from independent Worker Voice tools such as Ulula to gather feedback from workers while ensuring their anonymity.

Skill Set

Due to the limitations that are present in remote audits, auditors need to be equipped with a new skill set, particularly adapting to remote and technological platforms and establishing interviewees' trust to ensure effective virtual engagements. This may necessitate the development of a new list of indicators and

methods for conducting remote audits. Auditors should research the background of units being audited and the potential issues, to be able to look beyond what they are seeing and being told in interviews to ensure the real issues faced on the ground can be uncovered. The discussion also emphasised the importance of training auditors on integrity within auditing, as well as checking and ensuring quality of reporting.

The discussions uncovered many practical suggestions that can enhance remote audits and improve confidentiality and confidence in audit data. The following list of best practices summarises the feedback received from the forum's participants. Auditors and certificate holders may utilise the suggestions if applicable for the circumstances of their respective audits.

Best Practices to Enhance Remote Audit and Improve Confidentiality and Confidence in Data

Make pre-audit preparations

- Auditors should arrange calls prior to audits with certificate holders to go through audit plans and ensure companies understand how remote audit works.
- Auditors should acquire all relevant documents beforehand and conduct thorough desktop research.
- Auditors should allocate sufficient time for varied stakeholder engagement and get feedback from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) on local stakeholders mapping.

Ensure good Internet coverage

- Auditors should make sure Internet connectivity allows for the best audio and video quality to facilitate remote interviews.
- Certificate holders may need to arrange for Internet signal amplification at the audit site.

Identify focus of the audit

- Remote monitoring becomes easier and may reduce audit cost if the focus is on environmental issues.
- Social issues require auditors to establish trust with auditees and be familiar with the use of new technology.

Ensure confidential and targeted sampling

- Certificate holders should allow auditors to select interviewees from the company's stakeholders list and conduct last minute sampling for better control.
- Auditors should get a longer list of contact info from certificate holders to prevent interviewees from being identified.
- For interviewees outside companies (e.g. labour unions), auditors should ensure phone data is not used to identify interviewees.

Use local facilitators where necessary

- Remote audits may require the use of facilitators, especially when auditors are not well-versed in local languages.
- Capacity building needs to be conducted for local facilitators to ensure integrity, confidentiality, impartiality, correctness of interpretation and ability to help uncover underlying or undisclosed issues.

Develop training programme to improve auditing skills

- Auditors need to be trained in upholding integrity as well as checking and ensuring good quality of audit reports.
- When conducting interviews, auditors need to be skilled at handling conversations and convincing auditees to disclose information with confidence. A list of interview questions based on possible issues should also be prepared.
- Since auditors cannot control who is in the room during remote interviews, they should confirm who is present before starting the session.
- Auditors also need to emphasise the relevance of questions to the indicators to increase interviewees' confidence.
- Auditors should refrain from providing direct feedback after an individual interview.

Explore innovative technology

- It is highly important to ensure the use of secure channels for information transfer. A specific platform for remote audit that can facilitate information transfer between auditors and certificate holders may need to be created and NDAs must be signed by both parties for the use of this platform.
- There is a need to explore the use of technology such as Worker Voice that allows workers to communicate concerns, feedback and suggestions anonymously.

Conduct post-audit validation

- Certificate holders and auditors should agree on a clear policy and procedure for data recording and data removal after audit.
- Auditors should document and validate audit findings and declare limitations of remote audit, and explicitly state next steps to address the limitations.
- Auditors should also carry out consultation of draft audit results to selected stakeholders to ensure robust and valid data.

RSPO is an international non-profit organisation formed in 2004 with the objective to promote the growth and use of sustainable oil palm products through credible global standards and engagement of stakeholders.

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