RSPO ASSURANCE FORUM 11

Bridging the Global Auditing Capacity Gap, Especially in High-Need Regions

A report on the forum held on 23 July 2025

Table of Contents

|	
Document Title	: RSPO Assurance Forum 11
Scope	: Virtual Forum for RSPO Members and Non-Members
Document Type	: Summary Report
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List of Acronyms Used

AI	**Artificial Intelligence**
AF11	**Assurance Forum 11; the forum this report regards**
ASC	**Assurance Standing Committee**
ASI	**Assurance Services International**
CB	**Certification Body**
CSD	**Certification Systems Document**
ESG	**Environmental, Social, and Governance**
EUDR	**European Union Deforestation Regulation**
FSC	**Forest Stewardship Council**
GAR	**Golden Agri-Resources**
GMT	**Greenwich Mean Time**
HCV	**High Conservation Value**
P&C	**RSPO Principles and Criteria**
Q&A	**Question-and-Answer**
RSPO	**Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil**
SCC	**Supply Chain Certification**
SEIA	**Social and Environmental Impact Assessment**
SIA	**Social Impact Assessment**
UAR	**Universal Audit Report**

Background

The RSPO Assurance Forum is a bi-annual event conducted by the RSPO Secretariat with the support of the Assurance Standing Committee (ASC). The forum seeks to create an open platform for constructive dialogue among the Secretariat, the ASC, RSPO Members, and non-RSPO Members. Each forum focuses on different themes, addressing various assurance-related topics to enhance the RSPO Assurance System. To date, the forums have been scheduled to maximise participation from stakeholders across different time zones.
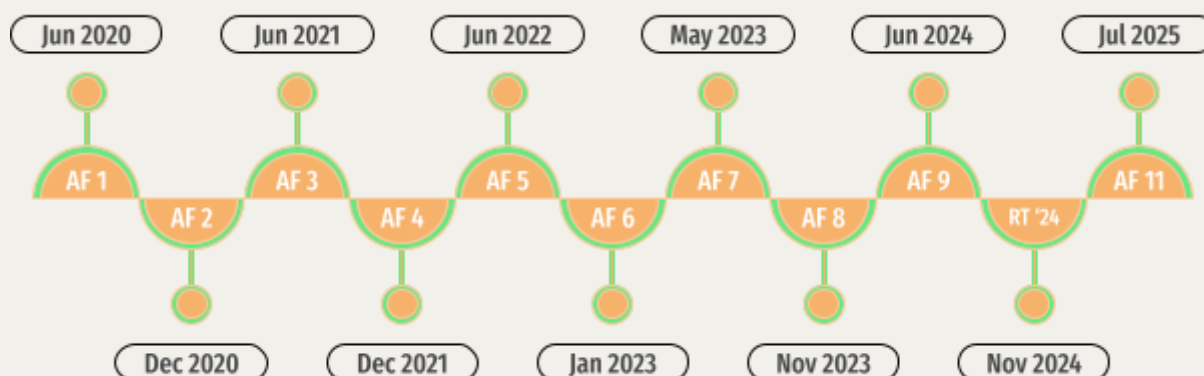
A timeline of all Assurance Forums

Details of the recently concluded Assurance Forum 11, which this report will discuss in detail, are as follows:
- Date: 23 July 2025
- Time: 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM (GMT+8)
- Venue: Virtual meeting via Zoom (link: https://zoom.us/j/91435966710)
- Recordings: Available upon request via the Secretariat (please email integrity@rspo.org)

Agenda

The RSPO Assurance Forum 11, held on 23 July 2025, focused on the theme of "Bridging the Global Auditing Capacity Gap, Especially in High-Need Regions". The discussion was centred around a chaired panel of representatives (by Anita Neville, Golden Agri-Resources, ASC Co-chair) from various sectors that are affected by the auditing capacity issue. Much of the discussion also took place in the Zoom meeting's chatbox, as well as the allotted Q&A sessions at the end of each topic in the agenda, reserved for verbal questions. Interactive sessions were held using Slido.com, where participants were able to give their feedback on multiple prompts. Below is the agenda for the two-hour forum:

11th RSPO Assurance Forum Agenda	
Topic	**Presenter**
Welcome Remarks	Ruth Silva
Setting the Scene: Capacity Gaps and Rising Expectations	Aryo Gustomo
Interactive Session: Experience Sharing via Slido	Freda Manan
Panel Discussion: Audit Under Pressure - What Shrinking Capacity Means for Us	Anita Neville and Panellists
Interactive Session: Solution Building via Slido	Zaidee Tahir
Panel Discussion: Solutions in Motion - Strengthening Audit Capacity Across the System	Anita Neville and Panellists
Summary and Closing Remarks	Ruth Silva

Participants

Attendees

The forum received 151 attendees, including members of the Assurance Standing Committee (ASC), RSPO Members, representatives from RSPO service providers, non-RSPO Members, and staff from the RSPO Secretariat. Below is a summarised list of organisations the participants represent:
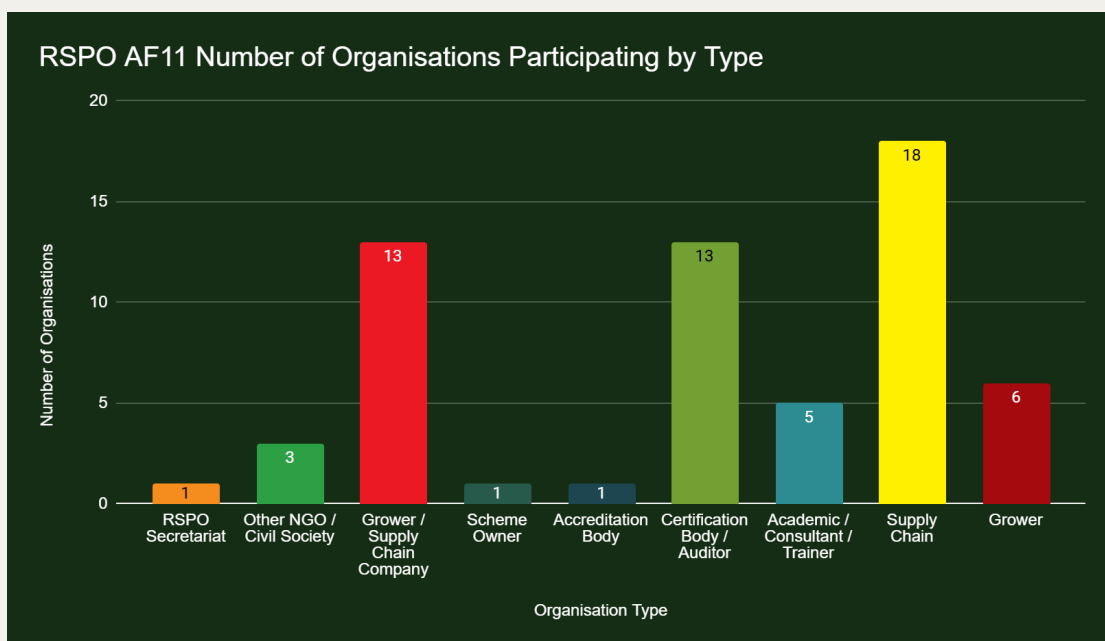
Number of organisations that attended AF11, by their sector.

Moderator

The panel was moderated by a Co-chair of the ASC:

Anita Neville is the Chief Sustainability and Communications Officer of Golden Agri-Resources (GAR), one of the world's largest palm oil companies.

She has over 20 years of experience in sustainability communications, spanning government, NGOs, and the private sector. Anita specialises in strategy development, campaign and crisis communications, and fostering NGO-corporate partnerships.

Having worked extensively in Australia, Europe, the UK, and now Singapore, she is dedicated to integrating sustainability and communications into core business strategy to strengthen corporate performance and credibility.

Anita Neville
Chief Sustainability and Communications Officer
Golden Agri-Resources Ltd

Panellists

The RSPO Assurance Forum 11 was centred around a panel of representatives from across the industry:

Farhan Ahmad
Assurance Manager
Forest Stewardship Council
(FSC)

Farhan is an Assurance Manager at FSC, where he has served for the past four years. He is responsible for developing, revising, and maintaining the general requirements for certification bodies within the FSC system.

His work plays a key role in strengthening the integrity, credibility, and consistency of FSC's global assurance framework.

Farhan holds a Master's degree in Environmental Governance from the University of Freiburg, Germany.

László Máthé
RSPO Accreditation
Programme Manager
Assurance Services
International (ASI)

László is the RSPO Programme Manager at ASI, joining in March 2024.

Based in Scotland, he brings extensive experience in sustainability and certification, having previously worked at the Sustainable Biomass Programme, WWF International, and New Britain Palm Oil Ltd, where he managed RSPO and Rainforest Alliance certification across PNG and the Solomon Islands.

He holds a Master's degree in Environmental Science and Policy and a degree in Forestry Engineering.

Adriana Cala
Director, Sustainable Palm Oil
Programs
SCS Global Services

Adriana leads the global Palm Oil Sustainable Programmes at SCS Global Services, covering RSPO and other palm oil schemes across Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, and the US.

With over 30 years in the palm oil industry, she brings deep expertise in feedstocks, Chain of Custody standards, and sustainability practices. She is a Lead Auditor and Trainer for RSPO P&C and SCC.

Before SCS, Adriana worked in consulting, advising agribusinesses on process efficiency, sustainability, and certification in the vegetable oils and fats sector.

Thomas Lavreys
RSPO Project Manager - Africa
Socfin

Thomas has been with Socfin for 10 years and has coordinated the Group's RSPO Certification efforts across its African oil palm operations since 2019.
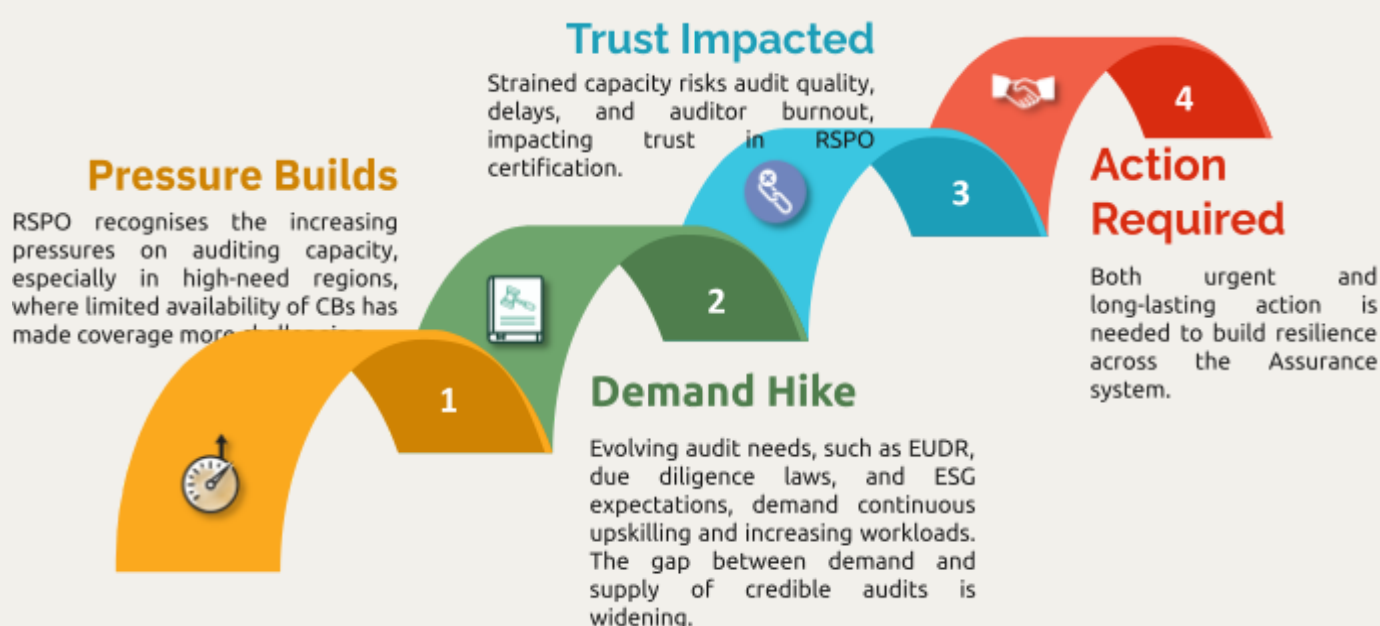
In 2024, Socfin achieved RSPO Certification for all its African oil palm sites.

His role has since expanded to cover broader sustainability areas, including greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) compliance, and living wage standards.

Setting the Scene

Ruth Silva, Senior Manager at HCV Network and ASC co-chair, opened the forum by stressing the critical role of audits in verifying sustainability commitments, warning of declining auditor capacity, and calling on all stakeholders to work together to address this global challenge.

To help participants understand the theme and discussions conducted in the forum, Aryo Gustomo, RSPO's Director of Assurance, presented and explained the following points:

Pressure Builds

RSPO recognises the increasing pressures on auditing capacity, especially in high-need regions, where limited availability of CBs has made coverage more challenging.

Demand Hike

Evolving audit needs, such as EUDR, due diligence laws, and ESG expectations, demand continuous upskilling and increasing workloads. The gap between demand and supply of credible audits is widening.

Trust Impacted

Strained capacity risks audit quality, delays, and auditor burnout, impacting trust in RSPO certification.

Action Required

Both urgent and long-lasting action is needed to build resilience across the Assurance system.

"We do not want to let our auditors do their jobs in the field to the point of burnout; we want to support them." - Aryo Gustomo, RSPO

The RSPO Secretariat acknowledged mounting pressure from stakeholders to address the shortage of auditors and CBs, noting this gap is exacerbated by regional disparities, evolving market and legislative demands such as the EUDR and ESG expectations, and increasing auditor burnout.

Recognising the risk these challenges pose to audit quality and RSPO certification credibility, the Secretariat has already initiated a series of responses:

- Intensifying collaboration with the accreditation body (ASI) to onboard new CBs.
- Revamping lead auditor training modules with regional context.
- Supporting CB expansion into underrepresented regions like Africa and Latin America.
- Revising certification system documents to facilitate entry pathways for qualified auditors from other schemes.
- Exploring partnerships with universities to grow the local auditor pool.

This forum was positioned as a key platform not only to acknowledge these challenges but also to collectively identify actionable, long-term solutions to reinforce the resilience and credibility of RSPO's Assurance System.
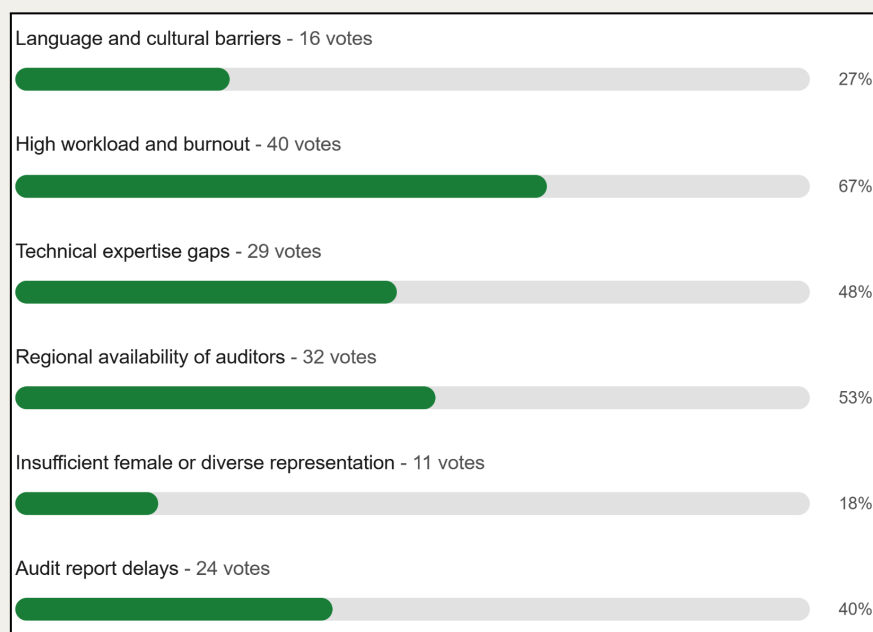
Interactive Session 1: Experience Sharing

"We are human beings auditing standards that are being implemented by other human beings... There is an incredible importance in the soft skills around auditing." - Anita Neville, Golden Agri-Resources

In a Slido poll, participants were asked to vote on the importance of:

What kinds of shortfalls do you see as prevalent in the global auditing capacity/capability in RSPO?

Language and cultural barriers - 16 votes
27%

High workload and burnout - 40 votes
67%

Technical expertise gaps - 29 votes
48%

Regional availability of auditors - 32 votes
53%

Insufficient female or diverse representation - 11 votes
18%

Audit report delays - 24 votes
40%

High workload, technical expertise gaps, and regional auditor availability are the top three most popular systemic issues, leading to burnout, affecting retention and performance, and indicating a need for capacity-building and strategic resource redistribution.

"There is a very high level of expectation in terms of credibility, and audits and auditors are at the core of delivering on this expectation." - Ruth Silva, HCV Network

Panel Discussion: Audit Under Pressure

To frame the discussion, the forum identified overarching categories of challenges that are affecting the delivery and quality of RSPO audits, many of which were echoed by multiple panellists:

Widening Auditor Shortages and Regional Disparities
- László Máthé (ASI) reported severe shortages in Africa and Latin America, with no RSPO-accredited CBs for the P&C in Africa and only limited coverage in Latin America.
- Contributing factors include limited local training provision, high certification costs, visa constraints, linguistic diversity, and political instability.
- The lack of experienced female auditors in some regions, such as Africa, further limits diversity and capability.

Auditor Burnout, Attrition, and Operational Bottlenecks
- Thomas Lavreys (Socfin) described how minimal recovery time between audits leads to delays and occasional licence suspensions.
- Retention challenges are linked to low pay, limited career progression opportunities, heavy workloads, and consecutive audit scheduling without adequate rest.
- High reporting demands also strain technical reviewers, managers, and support staff. Farhan Ahmad (FSC) also brought up that many current auditors are nearing retirement; younger professionals are more drawn to fields like climate change than auditing.

Increasing Complexity of Auditing
- During a question, a participant from an auditor training company pointed out that many of the P&C's indicators now address social issues, underscoring the need for auditors to apply strong interpersonal and investigative skills.
- Farhan and László noted that many auditors, especially freelancers, lack such skills and that independent auditors often miss CB-provided training.
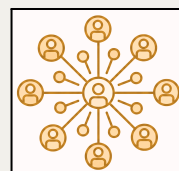
Integrity and Pressure in the Audit Process
- Adriana Cala (SCS) highlighted that clients can pressure to remove or dilute findings. Unrealistic KPIs, such as targets of "zero NCs", risk compromising independence.
- Poorly written NCs hinder corrective actions, weaken assurance, and prolong the closure of issues.

"KPIs should focus on process improvement, not zero findings." - Adriana Cala, SCS

Interactive Session 2: Solution Building

"When risk is high, we must do more: targeted measures, unannounced visits, and extra due diligence are essential." - Farhan Ahmad, FSC

In a Slido open text poll, participants were asked to provide their input on:

What practical actions do you believe would make the biggest difference in addressing auditing capacity? (Mentions of each category)

- Simplifying audit/reporting process
- Standards clarity
- Risk-based auditing
- Auditor competency & professionalism
- Training & development
- Extended audit duration/improved audit scheduling
- Technology & tools (AI, prisma)
- Rotation of indicators audited
- Simplifying qualification & pathways

The top three categories were simplifying the audit and reporting process, improving standards clarity, and implementing risk-based auditing, together reflecting the majority of participants' priorities for improvement.

"There's potential to shift some document reviews off-site, freeing time for more meaningful on-site engagement." - Thomas Lavreys, Socfin

For transparency, the poll collected a total of 55 responses (responses have been grammar-corrected):

No.	Response
1	Competency, professionalism, and integrity
2	Experience
3	Auditor with knowledge
4	Go for a risk-based approach as a practical action; increasing audit days will not help — it will cause more auditor burnout
5	Readiness
6	Enhance and clean up SCC standards; risk-based approach plus rotating indicators by theme (for lower-risk levels), etc.
7	Simplify qualification for SCC auditors
8	Everyone needs to come back to what the standards say; then clarity will come — everyone must understand the intent and spirit of the standards, including the RSPO team
9	Reporting simplification
10	Simplified audit reporting
11	Mandatory regular CB training, including for independent auditors they use (actual audit soft skills, etc.)
12	The standard must be clear
13	Risk-based approach
14	The sample for the report is too short
15	Risk-based approach
16	Risk-based approach and make requirements more specific than only general requirements. Sometimes the checking is too detailed, going beyond the requirement. If it's not detailed enough, the CB may receive an NC. However, the requirement only states the needs in general terms and not specific detail.
17	More time for audit
18	Focusing on several indicators in each surveillance audit is good practice. It will make auditors more focused and specific in checking the indicators that need to be assessed.
19	Risk-based approach
20	Risk-based approach is very subjective. Simplifying the report is better and focusing on the value that needs to be raised will also reduce the time for the auditor to make a report.
21	Creating an attractive career pathway for auditors, including engagement with universities to create a pipeline
22	Investing in auditor training, standardising audit methodologies, and fostering collaboration between CBs
23	Simplify the audit reporting
24	Refresher training
25	Knowledge

26	Improve the clarity of the standard
27	The standard needs to be clear enough, with sufficient guidance, allowing space for auditors/CBs to make their judgment
28	Make UAR simple and user friendly
29	Risk-based approach
30	Allow training for 2024 standards as soon as possible
31	Simplify the audit process and report
32	Rotation of criteria based on the full certification cycle, not all 163 criteria each year
33	Simplified reporting and extended timeline for reporting
34	Requirements should be more specific and easy to understand
35	Clear definition in the standard, auditor capacity, and auditor knowledge — the system is not specific in the scheme
36	Reduce the reporting for each indicator; emphasise non-conformities
37	Simplify the standard and audit report
38	Do not check the same document in surveillance audits (e.g., HCV Assessment, SEIA, SIA)
39	Study the current audit template and the number of days for auditors and the back office to finalise it (e.g., UAR). The template interpretation is still unclear
40	For audit preparation, a central research function at the Secretariat generates reports on issues in regions
41	Reduce the requirements, or make the requirements more specific
42	Clear standard; auditor and assessor proper capacity
43	Knowledge, skills, attitude, and integrity
44	Stronger CB competency development — an auditor needs more than a year to be competent
45	Make prisma work properly
46	Clear standard and library of scenarios
47	Standard and competency of auditors
48	Review the auditors' qualification requirements and cost
49	Simplification/shortening of the audit report; clear standard
50	Look into how AI can be used to assist auditing
51	Simplify where possible
52	Improve planning and scheduling
53	A risk-based approach or a regional risk-based approach
54	RSPO to look into audits focusing on 2–3 principles in each audit, as long as all 7 principles are covered within the 5-year certificate cycle. The current risk-based approach is already being implemented, but it is not enough
55	Simplify the auditing process

"The system should be about continuous improvement... punitive measures are not always aligned with that." - László Máthé, ASI

Panel Discussion: Solutions in Motion, Key Takeaways

The discussion converged on a set of system levers that, taken together, can relieve near-term pressure while strengthening the assurance model for the long term. Opportunities for questions and insight sharing were occasionally given to other participants.

Expanding training availability and audit scheduling: Panellists emphasised easier access to core and refresher training through regional delivery and online modules, coupled with partnerships with universities to widen the entry funnel. Targeted recruitment of local and female auditors, particularly in Africa, should be paired with structured mentorship so newer auditors learn interview technique, judgment and stakeholder engagement from senior colleagues. To retain talent, teams should build in recovery time and predictable cycles, for example, two audit weeks followed by a week reserved for reporting, to reduce burnout and create space for daily evidence triangulation, as is being implemented at SCS. Team composition should routinely include social specialists to match the growing weight of social criteria.

Audit quality and integrity: Several practical fixes were highlighted: standardise how NCs are drafted (clear linkage to indicators, triangulated evidence from documents, observations and interviews) and use a short pre-closing review with management to surface any last evidence, which reduces disputes at closing. Participants cautioned against internal KPIs such as "zero NCs," arguing instead for improvement-oriented metrics. Routine performance monitoring and calibration of auditors, annually and risk-based between cycles, can surface skill gaps early and guide coaching or pairing with more experienced auditors, which is a practice being advocated for by FSC. There was also support for making competency pathways more flexible so that relevant experience outside plantations can count toward P&C eligibility.

Enhancing process design and a risk-based focus: The forum suggested adopting a more disciplined, risk-based approach for surveillance years, rotating focus areas to cover all principles within a five-year cycle while annually addressing high-risk social topics. Additionally, consider shifting document-heavy tasks off-site by sharing policies and data months before fieldwork, allowing on-site time to be dedicated to engaging with workers and communities and conducting fieldwork. Also, to allocate a protected time block for audit teams to draft reports, which can prevent backlogs that might compromise licence validity.

Technology, used judiciously: The group saw value in embedding remote-sensing layers (canopy change, fire, encroachment, boundary issues) into *prisma*'s geographical modules so auditors can arrive prepared with targeted hypotheses. ASI has been testing AI-assisted checks on large datasets, such as payroll and working hours can speed up the detection of systematic risks. Worker-voice tools were viewed as complementary to audits. Remote interviews may help in supply-chain contexts, but are no substitute for in-person social auditing in plantations where trust and context matter. A harmonised toolkit across CBs was encouraged to preserve comparability.

🌍 **Cross-scheme coordination and CB expansion:** To expand capacity faster in underserved regions, ASI committed to streamlined accreditation pathways for CBs already accredited in other ASI-managed schemes and encouraged mutual recognition of auditor competencies where requirements overlap, particularly for social auditing. Joint outreach by RSPO and ASI to prospective CBs in priority countries is underway.

📄 **Finalising the CSD:** As the Certification Systems Document Revision is yet to be finalised, there was a suggestion to include some of the insights from this forum as part of the new implementation.

👨‍⚖️ **Enhanced requirements for independent auditors:** Some contract auditors may lack CB-provided skills training, so the forum supported requiring contract auditors to complete CB-led modules, especially on worker interviews, community engagement and handling sensitive issues, before deployment, with periodic calibration thereafter.

"Some of our recommendations from last year's Labour Auditing Guidance independent review have been taken up, particularly on audit preparation and risk-based auditing." - Bilge Daldeniz, Proforest

About Us

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

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Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil

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