



RSPO Research Agenda 2025

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RSPO Research Agenda

Background

Since 2004, RSPO has been taking active steps to collaborate with the global oil palm supply chain and other key stakeholders to transform the industry in line with our vision of making palm oil sustainable. Over the years, we have continuously sought to improve through experiential learning, the adoption of innovative approaches, and by remaining informed of international best practices.

In 2017, RSPO took a significant step forward with the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) to better articulate, manage, and measure our progress toward this vision. In 2022, we built on this foundation by reviewing our ToC as part of our new organisational strategy and rebranding efforts. This was undertaken in line with best practices and in compliance with the requirements of the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL), of which RSPO is a member. A key part of this process includes a renewed focus on learning and accountability through a structured monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approach. Supporting this MEL process is research, which may be commissioned by RSPO or conducted independently.

Our RSPO Research Agenda guides research institutions in assessing and examining the impact of RSPO. We published the first RSPO Research Agenda in 2018 to focus, inform, and coordinate our research efforts. One of our main objectives through this document is to gather and utilise research findings and evidence to inform our work, enabling continuous improvement towards our intended impacts, goals, and vision as outlined in the ToC.

Following updates to the RSPO ToC and MEL framework, we are now revising our Research Agenda to identify new areas of inquiry that will inform the ToC and address existing knowledge gaps. The updated Research Agenda was developed following consultations with the RSPO Secretariats and researchers within the palm oil sector. It was also shared with RSPO Members—via our standing committees and working groups—for their feedback. These updates ensure that our journey towards sustainable palm oil remains on the right path, aligned with our long-term vision and objectives.





Scope of Research Agenda

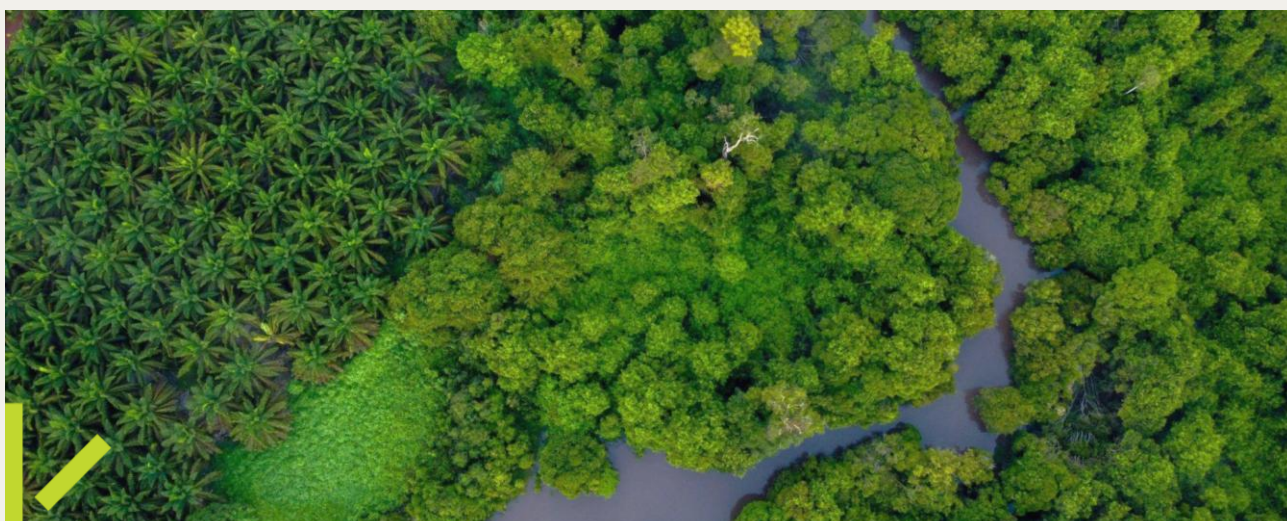
This document compiles a list of research questions aligned with RSPO's updated Theory of Change (ToC) and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Framework. The questions are organised around five thematic areas: Sustainable Ecosystem Management; Mitigating Climate Change: Emissions Management; Enhancing Labour Benefits and Stakeholder Equity; Enhancing Benefits for Palm Oil Producers; and Transforming Markets.

The primary aim of this Research Agenda is to better understand and demonstrate the performance and impact of RSPO's interventions and strategies, in order to improve our approaches for stronger outcomes. It also seeks to explore innovative research avenues that can help advance both RSPO and the broader sustainable palm oil sector.

The ToC defines the priority outcomes and impacts RSPO aims to achieve, and outlines the pathways through which the system intends to deliver these results. It provides a clear framework for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the effects of the certification system, as well as for adjusting the system's Standards, strategies, and activities to more effectively deliver key outcomes over time.

Research studies allow for a more in-depth assessment of how and to what extent key outcomes are achieved through RSPO's interventions. When designed using experimental or quasi-experimental methods, such studies can help establish causal linkages between RSPO Certification and defined outputs and outcomes, while also identifying broader impacts—including any unintended effects of certification.

The questions presented here are intentionally broad in scope, with no specific geography or segment of the palm oil supply chain identified. This broad scope reflects our interest in understanding how diverse territorial, social, topographic, and spatial factors may influence or constrain the effectiveness and impact of our Standards.





Research Themes & Key Priorities

Sustainable Ecosystem & Community Livelihood Management

1. What are the key indicators and cost-effective methodologies for efficient management and monitoring of High Conservation Value (HCV) areas within small-scale oil palm plantations, taking into consideration the limited resources and capabilities of smallholders?
 - a. What role and how can new technology, smartphones and apps, play in a citizen science approach to smallholder monitoring?
2. Enhancing RSPO efforts (e.g., RSPO Remediation and Compensation Procedure, HCV-HCS assessments) through integrated mapping of HCV-HCS Areas, protected forest areas, biodiversity, and community data for improved conservation efforts and community benefits.
 - a. Compare and contrast the methodological approaches, including satellite images, lidar (ground/air based), 3D photos, drone mapping, community mapping/manual GIS (2D or 3D) and assess their viability (technical, economic and social).
3. To what extent do best land management practices in RSPO Certified areas contribute to protection of water quality (river, watersheds, drainage ditches, etc.) within oil palm plantations? How can RSPO further contribute to maintenance of water quality at a landscape scale?
4. How do the RSPO's requirements concerning the identification as well as management and monitoring (M&M) of forested social HCVs affect the welfare of communities living in or around RSPO Certified plantations, and what are some successful approaches for effectively managing and monitoring these social HCVs within oil palm plantations?
5. To what extent and how have RSPO Membership requirements, such as the New Planting Procedure (NPP), impacted rates of forest loss and the conservation of forested areas within oil palm plantations established by RSPO Members? What trends and implications have emerged from these measures (i.e. leakage and spillover effects)?
6. How has RSPO Certification, along with its guidance on best management practices for oil palm cultivation on peatlands, affected the management of oil palm grown on peat?
7. To what extent did RSPO Members engage in historical deforestation activities beyond RSPO cut-off dates, and has the RSPO Remediation and Compensation Procedure (RaCP) contributed to remediation of past deforestation and enhancement forest and/or ecosystem services protection efforts among RSPO Members?
 - a. Consider the different forest types (e.g. peat, swamps, riparian, etc).



8. How has RSPO's RaCP impacted the well-being and livelihoods of communities affected by the operations of RSPO Member companies?
 - a. Explore recommendations for improvements to existing social remediation and/or compensation requirements of the RSPO RaCP.
9. How does the RSPO contribute to global net zero emissions and biodiversity recovery commitments? What are the current impacts of RSPO in relation to these commitments, and what avenues exist for further improvement?
10. How can the RSPO enhance biodiversity at a landscape scale, within and surrounding oil palm plantations?
 - a. What key biodiversity indicators should be prioritised for effective management and monitoring of HCV-HCS areas, considering the specific ecological, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts? How can innovative monitoring approaches, such as citizen science, contribute to this effort?
 - b. How can the landscape matrix of oil palm plantations be enhanced to support biodiversity (e.g. improve permeability and use by wildlife) without compromising yields?
 - c. What role can payment for environmental services (PES) or conservation incentives play in supporting growers' (including smallholders) contributions to biodiversity conservation, and how can these mechanisms be integrated into RSPO's framework?
11. How can oil palm yields be increased while simultaneously reducing input usage, enhancing soil health and improving water quality, considering the varying capacities and resources of both large-scale growers and smallholders? Additionally, how can regenerative agricultural practices be integrated to promote long-term sustainability and resilience, especially for smallholders?
12. Does staged or phased approaches to replanting of oil palm reduce negative impacts on biodiversity, soil and water quality?
 - a. How can this approach be further optimised?
 - b. For smallholder farms, what role does intercropping models have on contributing to biodiversity and ecosystem services on farms?
13. What are the types of circular economy approaches that can be implemented in the operations of oil palm plantations and mills, as well as smallholder farms? What are the potential costs, benefits, and positive impacts of implementing these principles, and how can the RSPO Standards be improved to better promote circular economy practices?
14. What are the social and economic advantages derived from effective environmental and biodiversity management practices, and how can these benefits be quantified and integrated into financial balance sheets of organisations?



Mitigating Climate Change

1. What is the environmental impact, in terms of a life cycle analysis, of RSPO Certified palm oil compared to conventional palm oil, considering variations by country, and distinguishing between smallholder and large oil palm growers?
 - a. Taking into consideration 4 key indicator areas; Water (quality/use), Energy (RNE/FF), Land Use change (regeneration/degradation), GHG emissions and other key indicators that might be a priority.
2. Using a life cycle assessment (LCA), what are the most effective strategies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from palm oil production, and how do these strategies compare in terms of environmental impact and economic viability across different scales of operation?
3. How do greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of RSPO Certified palm oil compared to those of conventional palm oil and other oil crops?
 - a. Consider this across a variety of geographies and processing circumstances and innovations (e.g., belt press machine, biogas generator etc.)
4. How does climate change affect the operational resilience of oil palm plantations, particularly in relation to extreme weather events and resource fluctuations? What adaptive strategies can palm oil producers implement, and how can the RSPO support these efforts?
 - a. What are the specific health, safety, and well-being challenges that climate change poses for workers in oil palm plantations, and what measures can be taken to mitigate these risks?
 - b. In what ways does climate change impact the long-term sustainability and productivity of oil palm plantations, particularly regarding yield, water availability, and land subsidence? How can these challenges be addressed to ensure plantation longevity?





Enhancing Labour Benefits and Stakeholder Equity

1. How does RSPO Certification influence the implementation of the Living Wage by certified units, and under what conditions does this implementation improve the standard of living for workers and their families? What roles do factors such as legal minimum wages, employer and supply chain capacity to pay, and the availability of Living Wage benchmarks play in shaping these outcomes?
2. Under what conditions (e.g., type of job, skill level, gender) are workers in the palm oil sector more likely to be casually employed, and to what extent does RSPO Certification influence the prevalence of casual employment without contracts or with vulnerable employment conditions?
3. Does RSPO Certification have an impact on promoting gender equity and empowerment among women in oil palm farming? Are women within RSPO Certified palm oil production areas empowered to voice their concerns and actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their working conditions and well-being? If so, what factors enable this, and if not, what are the barriers preventing it?
4. To what extent does RSPO Certification, particularly its ethical recruitment requirements, help prevent forced labour and eliminate worker-paid recruitment fees in the palm oil industry?
 - a. Are there gaps within the current RSPO framework that may impede full compliance with ethical recruitment practices, and what country-specific challenges must be addressed to ensure effective implementation?
 - b. How can RSPO better support its members in adopting best practices for ethical recruitment, and what role can it play in closing these gaps?
5. Gap analysis between RSPO Standard and the EU Regulation to prohibit products made using forced labour.
6. How do palm oil companies' structure and govern their grievance mechanisms, and are they effective and accessible to workers and surrounding/indigenous communities to raise their grievances? What role can the RSPO play in enhancing the grievance mechanism in the palm oil industry?
7. What challenges are encountered in the implementation of the RSPO Policy on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Whistleblowers, Complainants, and Community Spokespersons (2018), and what is the observed effectiveness of this policy in promoting the rights of these individuals?



8. What are the country-specific challenges for smallholders in implementing the Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) procedure on existing farms and new planting?

The normative framework of FPIC is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), International Labour Convention No. 169 ("ILO 169"), known as the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), among many others, as well as national laws. The FPIC is slowly becoming crystallised into hard law, yet, there is still ambiguity about executing the principle among countries that have signed UNDRIP. A country specific research on the conformity of FPIC and whether states have incorporated in their domestic laws, what are the challenges with implementation of FPIC and recommendations.

9. How can RSPO support its members, including smallholders and medium growers, in effectively meeting market demands for Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) and Environmental Due Diligence (EDD)?
 - a. How prepared are RSPO Members and what specific steps have they taken to align their operations with HRDD and EDD requirements, considering the challenges posed by these frameworks?
 - b. What support can RSPO provide to ensure members' compliance and integration of these frameworks within their practices? Given that meaningful stakeholder engagement is necessary for the conduct of HRDD, how can RSPO facilitate more effective stakeholder engagement within its member organisations?
10. How do RSPO Member companies approach community conflict resolution and prevention, and what factors influence the effectiveness of their strategies?
 - a. What specific strategies do RSPO Member companies use to resolve and prevent community conflicts? What factors (e.g. company practices, local context, stakeholder engagement) influence the effectiveness of these strategies?
 - b. How does being a member of the RSPO and adhering to its certification standards help companies prevent and resolve community conflicts?
 - c. How do these conflict resolution efforts impact local communities, and how are they perceived by both the companies and the communities across different regions?



Enhancing Benefits to Palm Oil Producers

For all research questions in this section, it is important to consider gender-related aspects to ensure that all smallholders (men and women) have equal access to resources, benefits, and decision-making processes, while addressing the unique challenges they may face based on gender roles and responsibilities.

1. True Cost Analysis: How does RSPO Membership and Certification impact the economic profitability, social well-being and environmental sustainability of oil palm production for smallholders, and what is the break-even point of production area per capita for certified vs non-certified smallholders, by country/region?
 - a. To what extent do smallholders receive any type of benefit (social-economic or business) related to RSPO Membership and Certification?
 - b. What are the costs associated in pre-certification, certification and post-certification? Who bears these costs and how do they affect profitability?
2. What types of smallholder organisations/groups are prevalent across different production regions? What are the advantages and disadvantages, as well as incentives and disincentives for individual smallholders in joining these groups? Additionally, what challenges do smallholders face in joining such groups, and what barriers and opportunities exist for existing organizations to comply with RSPO Standards for group certification?
3. Smallholder baseline study: What are the operational characteristics, production pathways or systems and financial vulnerabilities of smallholders in different countries (especially emerging countries such as South America and Africa)?
 - a. What are the gaps, costs, risks and opportunities to certifying smallholders in these regions?
 - b. How do the risks and vulnerabilities of smallholders vary between formal and informal collection centers, and between controlled and non-controlled mills, particularly in relation to their debt status?
4. Does the stepwise approach of RSPO Independent Smallholder (ISH) Standard make financial sense for oil palm smallholders in terms of sustainability and profitability?
 - a. Under what circumstances does it or does it not make financial sense, taking into account the costs of audits and assessments related to certification, and the distribution of income from selling RSPO Credits?
5. What business models can be designed to ensure that oil palm smallholders derive substantial benefits from being a part of RSPO Certification?
 - a. How do these models vary by country and operational context of smallholders (including structure and size of land, and numbers of smallholders)? Will these models allow for smallholders to maintain or sustain certification without external facilitation?



6. How can different microfinance models support and sustain smallholder RSPO Certification processes, and what are the comparative benefits of cooperative, association, and small micro-enterprise scales for smallholders in achieving self-sustaining certification?
 - a. In what ways can microfinance models be integrated into sustainable finance approaches to support smallholder certification processes in the palm oil sector, and what business model innovations are necessary to maximise their impact?
 - b. How do cooperative, association, and small microenterprise scales differ in their suitability and effectiveness for implementing microfinance models aimed at supporting RSPO Certification among smallholders?
7. To what extent do RSPO training modules and capacity-building platforms contribute to improving sustainability practices among RSPO Members?
8. What are the implications of increased regulatory demands on Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and smallholders with regards to the supply chain of the palm oil industry? What measures can be adopted to improve the compliance capabilities of SMEs and smallholders, particularly in alignment with European Union Due Diligence Regulations (EUDR) and due diligence regulations?
9. How do smallholders manage their oil palm fields in terms of plantation design, crop choices, soil, water, and nutrient management, waste management, pests and disease management and biodiversity conservation, and what are their experiences and perceptions on barriers and opportunities for implementing practices in accordance with climate-smart agricultural certification systems?
10. To what extent do current market dynamics (e.g. supply chain), existing market access mechanisms (e.g. RSPO Credits), and the engagement of key players in developing any business model or strategy, facilitate or hinder the participation of smallholder certified palm products in the market?
 - a. What are the key challenges faced by markets in sourcing and supporting certified smallholder products (e.g. supply consistency, traceability, cost)? What strategies or business models can be developed to improve these conditions?
 - b. What are the specific constraints faced by smallholders in accessing markets and maximising their potential value addition?
 - c. How can downstream supply chain players adjust their procurement practices to foster sustainable business models for smallholders - supporting smallholders in producing sustainably and overcoming barriers to market access?
11. What are the ecological, economic, and social complexities associated with wild palm harvesting in the West and Central African region (specifically Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria), and how feasible is the application of existing RSPO Certification standards to ensure sustainable management? Additionally, how can the RSPO Standards be enhanced or adapted to better align with sustainability goals and regulatory frameworks?
12. What are the key challenges and opportunities associated with certifying artisanal mills within the palm oil industry, considering their categorisation, value chain contribution, market connections, potential environmental and social risks, and the legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms governing their operations?

13. How can intercropping during the immature stage of oil palm cultivation improve the financial sustainability of smallholders? How and what role can RSPO play in promoting intercropping models to enhance smallholder income and well-being, while contributing to biodiversity and ecosystem services on smallholder farms?
14. What are the effects of the RSPO and other national standards on palm oil (e.g. Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO), Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil, Colombian National Sustainable Palm Oil Program (APSCO) on the economic (e.g. market access), social, and environmental outcomes for different types of palm oil producers, and how can collaboration among these schemes support sustainable practices across the palm oil sector in the region?





Transforming Markets

1. Does RSPO Certification help improve sustainability and risk disclosure and reporting among oil palm member companies?
2. Analysing changing and emerging consumer preferences and market dynamics in the palm oil industry:
 - a. To what extent are consumer preferences and awareness influencing market dynamics in the palm oil industry compared with other value chain players, and how does this vary across different global markets?
 - b. Compare and contrast the various strategies (e.g. public awareness and education, among youth and children) for raising RSPO awareness and demand across different global markets and countries in terms of their effectiveness and impact?
 - c. What is the role of social media and content marketing in shaping key narratives influencing consumer preferences and market dynamics in the palm oil industry?
3. What is the extent of market penetration for RSPO Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO), and how is the economic performance of the CSPO industry as a whole?
 - a. Is there any data suggesting the presence of a tipping point for CSPO adoption, considering that RSPO accounts for 19% of the global palm oil market? Additionally, is this tipping point evenly distributed across various global markets, or are certain markets more influential in driving CSPO adoption than others?
4. What are the pathways for shifting 80% of the palm oil production and milling to certified sustainably produced? What is the tipping point and is it the same for each region? What are the partnerships necessary and the value chains most likely to deliver this 80% shift?
5. What do RSPO Members and non-members need and expect from participating in RSPO Membership, particularly concerning sustainable palm oil practices and management? How can the RSPO enhance its capacity to meet these needs and provide effective additional services?
6. What is the perception of the level of engagement, participation, and representation among different categories of RSPO Members?
 - a. How does this increase levels of knowledge acquired, skills, confidence, ability and capability to influence sustainability related issues in the wider sector?
7. How can consumer preferences and social acceptability be leveraged to increase market infiltration and support for certified smallholder palm oil amidst the negative perceptions surrounding palm oil in various markets?
 - a. To what extent does consumer awareness of the challenges faced by palm oil producers, particularly smallholders, regarding regulatory requirements influence their market position and perception?



About Us

Established in 2004, RSPO is a not-for-profit, international membership organisation that unites stakeholders from the key sectors of the palm oil industry to promote the growth and use of sustainable palm oil through credible global standards.

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