

# Putting People First: Strengthening Social Safeguards and Inclusive Participation in Biodiversity Policy Setting and Finance Plans

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## Setting the Scene for Social Environmental Standards in Biodiversity

Conservation efforts often fail not because science is wrong, but because the people most affected were never meaningfully involved in the decisions.

This was the central message of a webinar hosted by UNDP's Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) on 26 May 2026, which explored how UNDP's [Social and Environmental Standards](#) (SES) help ensure that biodiversity projects not only protect nature but also respect the rights, knowledge, and livelihoods of the people who depend on it.

The SES are mandatory for all UNDP programmes, regardless of how they are implemented. Within the partnership between BIOFIN and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the standards are much more than a compliance requirement.

"SES is not a checklist exercise," said Quality Assurance Specialist Pem Wangdi. Instead, it is a practical tool that helps identify and address potential social and environmental risks early in project design, strengthening trust, accountability, and the long-term success of conservation initiatives.

As Wangdi explained, decisions about land use are often made far from the communities they affect, with unintended consequences for Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and people who depend on forests and other natural resources. Through the BIOFIN GEF Umbrella Programme and the GEF-8 Umbrella Programme for NBSAP and Seventh National Report (7NR) Support, SES helps place people at the centre of biodiversity planning by promoting meaningful participation and collaboration from the outset.

## Global Alignment: SES and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF)

Current safeguard efforts are designed to align with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), particularly Targets 22 and 23 concerning Indigenous peoples and local communities and gender-responsive approaches, respectively, and the associated Gender Plan of Action. For instance, Thailand's "Triple Win" approach across biodiversity, climate and gender serves as a direct, measurable contribution to Target 23 (Gender Equality) through integrating their first Gender Plan of Action with their first Local Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (LBSAP), placing women at the center of action on biodiversity.

The current global shift emphasizes moving away from the "tokenism" that characterized many previous National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs). By addressing structural demographic realities—such as in Guatemala, where women represent 50.4% of the population yet face persistent structural inequalities—safeguards ensure that participation is meaningful, culturally appropriate, and gender-responsive. By engaging Indigenous Peoples and local

communities and vulnerable groups early in the process, projects are more likely to gain support and avoid challenges later on.

## **Safeguards in Action: Country Case Studies**

### *1. Thailand: The Triple-Win for Gender and Finance*

Thailand has pioneered a "Triple Win" approach (Biodiversity, Climate, Gender). A hallmark of this strategy is the Koh Tao model, the first non-protected area to create a self-sustaining finance model for conservation. This initiative includes the "Coco Tie Dye" project, which empowers local women by linking business development with nature protection. This model is being replicated in Phetchaburi's Pak Thale area to protect the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. This replication is supported by a 20-Baht tourist fee ordinance and a sub-national public-private partnership co-financed by Krungthai Bank, which provided US\$183,240 in impact investment.

### *2. The Philippines: Indigenous-Led Biodiversity Costing*

The Philippines facilitated the development of the world's first Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (IPBSAP). This was a landmark partnership where BIOFIN provided the costing support, while Indigenous Peoples (IP) provided the ancestral knowledge. Supported by BIOFIN, participants used their lived experiences to develop costing inputs and implementation requirements, proving that complex technical financial planning can be made accessible and grounded in the realities of Indigenous Peoples.

### *3. Guatemala: Inclusive Knowledge Generation*

In Guatemala, where Indigenous Peoples represent 40–45% of the population and women make up 50.4%, the NBSAP update prioritized cultural inclusion to overcome structural inequalities. The team utilized culturally responsive methodologies, such as using WhatsApp—a more accessible tool for local stakeholders—rather than email. To reinforce trust, Guatemala established an online tracking system that allows participants to see exactly how their contributions were incorporated into the official documents, ensuring continuous feedback.

### *4. Colombia: Massive Scale Participatory Governance*

Colombia's NBSAP update involved 10,000 people and 15 government ministries. Through dedicated platforms for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Colombian Peoples, and Amazon stakeholders, the process demonstrated how large-scale participation can strengthen biodiversity planning and ensure diverse voices are reflected in decision-making.

### *5. Liberia: Rebuilding Trust through Community Forestry*

In Liberia, stakeholder engagement is a prerequisite for rebuilding institutional trust and ensuring the feasibility of conservation solutions. In Grand Bassa County, a community initially resisted a logging project. Through intensive stakeholder meetings, local voices reshaped the project to protect sacred traditional sites and establish benefit-sharing agreements. This case illustrates the power of linking biodiversity goals to community livelihoods as a driver for buy-in and conflict sensitivity.

## 7. Key Recommendations for Country Teams

To ensure effective safeguard implementation and project sustainability, it was discussed that country teams should adopt the following actionable strategies:

- **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement:** Conduct nationally customized stakeholder analyses. Use culturally appropriate and accessible engagement approaches to ensure the participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, and underrepresented groups.
- **Downstream Risk Assessment:** Meticulously screen Biodiversity Finance Plans (BFPs), NBSAPs, and 7th National Reports for social and environmental impacts. Identify and integrate measures to avoid discriminatory outcomes into monitoring and evaluation systems.
- **Gender Mainstreaming:** Conduct customized gender analyses and develop specific strategies. Ensure that gender mainstreaming is integrated into all project outcomes to promote equitable participation and benefits.
- **Accountability and Feedback:** Establish and provide access to project-level Grievance Redress Mechanisms. Maintain clear feedback loops and iterative processes to build momentum, maintain trust, and reduce implementation risks.

In conclusion, the transition from purely technical, top-down planning to "bottom-up" participatory models is the defining theme of modern biodiversity programming. Gender equality, when treated as a core pillar of success rather than an afterthought, leads to more sustainable conservation outcomes, as demonstrated by Thailand's gender-responsive budgeting and impact investments. A common thread across all cases was rebuilding trust; whether in Liberia's logging resistance or Colombia's NBSAP consultations, inclusive engagement prevents the friction that often derails conservation goals. By using localized tools—from ancestral knowledge in the Philippines to WhatsApp in Guatemala and creating a direct link between conservation finance and community livelihoods, countries are proving that social safeguards are the ultimate driver of sustainable environmental outcomes.