



RSS STEP 5

MONITORING AND REVIEW



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THE RSS FIELD GUIDES

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RSS Step 5: Monitoring and Review

At RSS Step 5 you will assess the impact of activities to mitigate risk and address farmer needs, and the process by which these impacts have been arrived at.

Impacts are benchmarked against:

- The original objectives of the Implementing Entity (as defined at Step 1)
- The risks identified at Step 2a around minimum core issues
- The expressed needs of farmers for support on production practices, identified at Step 2b.

On this basis you will determine how effective and relevant the activities in your action plan have been. You will complete the RSS planning cycle by updating or reworking your action plan as required to drive continuous improvement.

Some of the information you need will have been collected through the monitoring plan introduced in Step 4. At this stage you may need to gather further information through consultation with your smallholder suppliers and external sources.

The purpose of this step is:

- To assess progress in mitigating risks and addressing farmers' needs towards the ultimate RSS objectives
- To understand the effectiveness and efficiency of the RSS action plan, with an analysis of why things are or are not working and identification of any gaps or unintended outcomes
- If necessary, to revise the action plan or develop a new action plan based on this analysis
- To consolidate information on the RSS process and outcomes that may be used in communicating with buyers and other stakeholders.

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1. Assess impacts of RSS action plan

1.1 Decide when to conduct your assessment and review

The question of when to conduct an assessment and review will depend on the timeframe for your action plan and the length of your planning cycle. As indicated in Step 3, this may vary, but it is unlikely that detailed planning will span more than 12 months. Throughout this period, you will be monitoring progress in delivery of activities and results.

You may decide to undertake an assessment and review at any time, if:

- Your plan is going off track, with activities not delivered, delayed or failing to achieve the expected results

Or

- There is a significant change in circumstances that suggests you may need to revisit priorities and methods of the action plan.

In the more likely event that implementation of your action plan is on track (within tolerable limits) then towards the end of the planning period you will want to make decisions on continuing, extending, adapting and/or redirecting support for the immediate future. These decisions are best informed by an assessment and review of actions to date.

1.2 Define impact indicators

At this step you can make use of the result indicators set out in your action plan (Step 3) and integrated into your monitoring plan (Step 4), but it is also important to define additional indicators against which to assess impact.

As the Implementing Entity (IE) you have invested in providing or facilitating support through your RSS action plan. To assess the return on this investment you should refer to the **objectives** you defined when committing to RSS back at Step 1 of the process. These objectives probably reflect closely the **risks around minimum core issues** identified at Step 2a. Ideally you will want to see such risks reduced. It is seldom easy to quantify such a reduction, but you can look for **proxy indicators of reduced risk**.

Also you will want to understand how your smallholder suppliers have benefited as a result of applying any new production practices, streamlined systems and shared investments to meet their needs as identified at Step 2b. How do smallholders themselves perceive change? Have benefits reached all smallholders, communities and households?

You should select indicators of impact that allow for easy comparison between your baseline situation and any changes you wish to see, in levels of environmental and social risk, farm productivity and farmer well-being and in attitudes of stakeholders. It is important to specify how you will identify and measure impacts, in what form information on impacts will be collected and who will be responsible for ensuring this happens.

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Examples of indicators at impact level:

- Percentage of smallholder suppliers able to demonstrate legal compliance and uncontested tenure rights
- Incidence/rate of conversion of HCV forest in the smallholder production landscape
- Incidences reported to the responsible government authorities of child labour use or school attendance records for all school aged children
- Farmer yields, both in terms of quantity (per unit area/unit investment of time and resources) and quality
- Farm profitability, and distribution of any gains across communities, ethnic groups and gender
- Satisfaction rating for the working relationships between farmers and buyers. (Subjective assessment by both parties, suitably illustrated with examples to support ratings)
- Evidence of smallholder investment in sustainable production practices, ongoing or planned in the near future

Scale issues

If the RSS framework has been applied across a supply base that includes several processing units, you should compare results and impacts between these units and identify any variation. Analysis and explanation of systematic variations could provide useful lessons upon which to base a review of your action plan.



Box 1

Assessing progress towards certification

The RSS framework has proved to be a useful entry point and roadmap for smallholder suppliers to move towards externally audited certification of sustainable practice. For many Implementing Entities this will be an important objective and should be reflected in any monitoring, assessment and review. SHARP has conducted studies on the relationship between Principles and Criteria of several major certification standards and the RSS risk and needs assessments that comprise Step 2 of RSS. Contact the SHARP secretariat for more information on this area of assessment.

1.3 Where to source information

1.3.1 Building on your documentation of implementation

As you implemented your action plan, you tracked and documented delivery of activities to mitigate risk and address farmer needs, and compared your results with targets described in your plan (see RSS 4, section 2). This information should contribute to your assessment of achievement against impact indicators, but a complete picture probably requires further information specific to your impact indicators. For this purpose, various external sources may prove useful, including those stakeholders consulted at RSS Step 1.

Resources permitting, you may collect information on changes in smallholder knowledge, attitudes, access to services, production practices and plans for future investment through one-off focus group discussions and surveys. Appropriate mobile phone technology can reduce costs, particularly if farmers can be directly engaged in information gathering. Reference photography can complement narrative and quantified data to help illustrate impact.

1.3.2 Who has a 'stake'?

As the Implementing Entity your organisation will have a major stake in the outcomes of the RSS process. Internally you must decide if and how to involve different departments/divisions/managers in an assessment. Certainly it will be important to ensure senior managers with

the ultimate responsibility for sustainable sourcing buy into the process and have an opportunity to contribute to it.

Beyond your organisation there will be other stakeholders and interested parties, not least the smallholder suppliers with whom you have sought to engage through RSS. Their perspective on impacts will be critical. You may have partners who have worked alongside you on the implementation of the action plan, who may also have valuable information and ideas to bring to an assessment and review.

1.3.3 The value of external support for assessment

Where resources permit, drafting in specialist expertise with an external perspective can add significant value to an assessment, bringing objective analysis, fresh ideas and an opportunity for mediation on disputed issues. The best individual or organisation to provide such support will depend on context and budget. If you formed an advisory group at Step 1 you may have a useful source of support to hand – already familiar with the background to your work, the local landscape and the history of past engagement with smallholders. If you consider co-opting external input, you must decide how much control you wish to cede in the assessment process and how best to manage expectations of different external parties who may not always agree on conclusions.

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1.3.4 Farmer self-assessment

Farmer self-assessment can be an effective way to gather information to feed into an assessment, to ensure authenticity of its conclusions on smallholder support and as a means to deepen engagement and shared ownership of the RSS process with your smallholder suppliers.

To facilitate the self-assessment and make it specific to the indicators you selected, you can provide the farmers with checklists (with text and/or pictograms), farm record booklets, Excel sheets or templates for use on mobile devices. When selecting or developing a suitable tool for your smallholder supply base, take into account the following:

- Chosen indicators of change and impact (ref Steps 3 and 4 and section 1.2 above)
- Type of information appropriate to these indicators (Do you want farmers to record quantitative and/or qualitative information? Will you need closed or open questions to solicit this information?)
- Literacy and general education level of farmers
- Access to computers, internet, use of mobile phones

1.4 Relating impact to activities

Whether or not you are satisfied with the results and impacts of your RSS action plan, you also need to understand how and why change has occurred

before making decisions on further investment. Critical observation during the implementation of your RSS action plan can aid your understanding of cause and effect. Any variances recorded during implementation could be particularly useful in explaining the process of change (in behaviour, attitude, response and performance).

Can you attribute any positive change directly to your actions? Have there been other contributing or inhibiting factors, external or internal? Have there been any unintended positive or negative consequences? Have results and impacts exceeded expectations? What could have gone better and why?

Answers to these questions will inform your assessment of the effectiveness and continued relevance of your action plan, and should inform your thinking on how to improve efficiency of any future cycles of investment in RSS.

1.5 Planning

Putting together elements from 1.1 to 1.4 you should now be in a position to frame a simple plan for undertaking an assessment of your action plan. The key elements of this plan should be:

- An objective – probably as simple as ‘to assess impacts of the action plan and the process by which these impacts have been arrived at’
- A list of the indicators on which information is required
- Methods of data collection or sources of information (collation of monitoring

data collected over the period of implementation, information from other existing records, interviews, survey questionnaires, focus group discussions etc.)

- Identification of participants/ stakeholders and how each will contribute – could be active or passive
- Where you have the benefit of colleagues and partners to support your assessment, the identification of this team and assignment of responsibilities within the team
- A schedule for implementation
- Methods and deadlines for reporting your conclusions

1.6 Capturing your conclusions

Now you should be in a position to assess the impacts of your RSS action plan on core areas of risk and priority farmer needs and to relate these impact to the activities delivered under your action plan.

You can document your conclusions in the format at Annex 1.

2. Review the action plan

Having assessed the impacts to date of your action plan you are now in a position to look forward and consider developing a plan for the next cycle of support on both pillars of RSS.

2.1 A repeat risk and needs assessment?

A formal process, with a full repeat of RSS Step 2 is unlikely to be necessary. Closer engagement and more frequent exchanges of information with your smallholder suppliers should be providing useful information on any emerging risks and evolving farmer needs. The conclusions of your monitoring and assessment should provide ample basis for updating your earlier assessments of risks and needs.

2.2 An evolution of priorities and objectives?

If the support you provided to your smallholder suppliers has resulted in positive change in their technical and organisational capacity, and if your mutual working relationships and understanding of risks and opportunities are improving at the same time, it is likely that you and your smallholder suppliers will see new priorities that have moved on from those at the start of the RSS process.

At this point you can follow the guidance on prioritising risks and support needs found in sections 4.2 of RSS Steps 2.a and 2.b respectively. The criteria for

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prioritisation should remain valid through successive cycles of RSS but the process of consulting with your smallholder suppliers and with other stakeholders should be progressively more efficient and effective.

A format for documenting your conclusions on priority risks and support needs is provided at Annex 2. This follows the formats at Steps 2.a and 2.b, for ease of comparison to provide evidence of progress as well as justification for the decisions behind a revised action plan.

2.3 Updating or reworking your action plan

2.3.1 Updating an existing RSS action plan

This may be appropriate **if**:

- Priority risks and support needs have not changed significantly

Or:

- Your assessment indicates that support actions implemented in the previous cycle of RSS are producing the expected results and can be expected to deliver the desired changes and impacts in due course

In this case you may adapt your existing plan by adjusting timelines and verifying details on implementation teams, monitoring and budget/resources.

2.3.2 Reworking your RSS action plan

This could be necessary **if**:

- a) Your assessment indicates that actions to date are not producing the expected

results. This would imply a need to revisit some assumptions on which your action plan was based and adjust your delivery approach. Your objectives and desired impacts have not changed, but you need to rethink the means by which these can be achieved.

Or:

- b) Priority risks and support needs have changed significantly as a result of evolving market conditions or expectations, changes in the social or economic context or in regulatory frameworks, voluntary or legal. This would imply a need to:

- Adjust your objectives
- Deliver different results and impacts
- Plan for a new set of activities to achieve these revised results
- Determining appropriate indicators to monitor

Or:

- c) Priority risks and support needs have changed significantly because the support you have provided to date has successfully reduced the risks and needs originally prioritised. You may have seen improved production practices, better internal controls and transparency that will reduce future risk and increase farmer knowledge and capacity in targeted areas. However, where there are further areas of risk or farmer need that could not be prioritised in the previous RSS cycle you can continue along the pathway of continuous development by setting new objectives/desired impacts and plan for their achievement.

In any of these cases you can return to RSS Steps 3 and 4 to develop, implement and document a new action plan, following the same guidance and using the same reporting formats. Ensure that you build in smallholder participation in any update or rework of the action plan and consult with other external stakeholders to retain their understanding and support for the process.

2.4 The cycle of continuous improvement

A new action plan can build on experience gained, relationships developed and lessons learned through a previous cycle of RSS implementation. It can address emerging priorities and establish a pattern for action learning and continuous improvement through which current and future risks can be effectively managed and smallholders can be integrated more effectively into responsible supply chains.



Box 2

Evaluation – examining your strategy for smallholder engagement in more depth

With an understanding of the costs and benefits of your RSS action plan, and considering progress towards your original objectives, you may decide you need a more fundamental evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of your RSS implementation strategy. This could be the best option to inform longer term decisions on future investment in your smallholder suppliers. It could help you to identify if a switch in focus or change in approach that may enhance effectiveness.

However, such an evaluation would be more demanding of time and resources as external expertise is generally required to provide greater insight and objectivity. This is beyond the monitoring, assessment and review described in this field guide. It would look beyond the RSS objectives framed at Step 1 and would sit outside the scope of the cycle for continuous improvements described in Steps 2 to 5 of the RSS framework. It is at the Monitoring and Review step in the RSS process that an in-depth evaluation may be considered. Therefore, brief guidance on planning for an evaluation is provided at Annex 3 of this field guide.

Annex 1 – Template for documenting conclusions of action plan assessment

Support Needs				
1st Support need	Expected results (from action plan)	Observed results (from monitoring delivery against targets during implementation)	Explanation of variances What key factors explain these variances (positive, negative, external, internal)	Assessment of the effectiveness and relevance of support activities intended to address this need
2nd Support need	Expected results (from action plan)	Observed results	Explanation of variances	Assessment of effectiveness and relevance
3rd Support need	Expected results	Observed results	Explanation of variances	Assessment of effectiveness and relevance
Desired impact What impact on farmer livelihoods was anticipated consequent to building farmer capacity in these areas of need?	Indicators of impact	Assessment of impact	Explanation	Implications for action plan review

Risk Mitigation					
1st Risk identified	Expected results (from action plan)	Observed results (from monitoring delivery against targets during implementation)	Explanation of variances What key factors explain these variances (positive, negative, external, internal)	Assessment of the effectiveness and relevance of support activities intended to address this need	
2nd Risk identified	Expected results	Observed results	Explanation of variances	Assessment of effectiveness and relevance	
3rd Risk identified	Expected results	Observed results	Explanation of variances	Assessment of effectiveness and relevance	
Desired impact What impact on Minimum Core Issues central to the responsible sourcing was anticipated, as a result of these risk mitigation efforts?	Indicators of impact	Assessment of impact	Explanation	Implications for action plan review	

Annex 2a – Format for recording conclusions on priority risks

Core Issue 1: Land rights and conflicts	Likelihood of poor practice	Severity of impact	Overall Significance	Comments and justification
Use rights				
Significant land conflicts				
Core issue 2: Deforestation and land conversion				
Deforestation and conversion natural ecosystems				
Protection of natural habitats				
Core issue 3: Labour rights and working conditions				
Workers' conditions				
Child or forced labour				
Other issues identified by the Implementing Entity				

Annex 2b – Format for recording conclusions on support needs

Overview of smallholder needs prioritised	Area in the supply base	Target groups/ smallholders identified	Justification
Better yields and food security			
Improved livelihoods and institutions			
Better agricultural practices			
Others needs/areas of support			

Annex 3 - Brief guidance on planning for an evaluation

Purpose

An evaluation will be most effective if you are clear from the beginning about what you are evaluating and what is the purpose. This could be to evaluate:

- Effectiveness and efficiency of strategies for risk mitigation and/or improving smallholder production
- Relevance and/or coherence of such strategies with internal policies on responsible sourcing and smallholder engagement
- Relevance and/or coherence of such strategies with changes in the operating environment and legal framework for business

A specific area of assessment at RSS Step 5 may be progress towards certification. If progress is satisfactory there will be no immediate need for an in-depth evaluation. However, in implementing the RSS framework you may gain a different perspective on the challenges and opportunities for your smallholder suppliers. You may then opt for an evaluation to examine the effectiveness of RSS as a step-wise approach to certification. Or your purpose may be to evaluate strategic options within an RSS framework to address newly recognised or emerging challenges. You may even seek to evaluate the relevance of certification as an objective for RSS.

Evaluation Questions

Having fixed your overall purpose, you need to decide on the specific questions that you seek to answer to guide your enquiries and analysis. In framing these questions you should consider:

1. Reach
2. Engagement
3. Results of RSS, expected and delivered
4. Implementation strategies, planned and realised
5. Context

Also you should consult the RSS stakeholders first engaged in Step 1, with a view to incorporating their perspectives and interests in your evaluation questions.

Resources

An evaluation plan must be realistic, so try not to set too many questions for the evaluation to answer. You will need to reconcile the time and resources at your disposal with the scope and terms of reference for an evaluation. Bear in mind that an effective examination of profound evaluation questions will normally require external expertise to provide greater insight and objectivity.

You will need to decide if this is to be a commercial exercise, privately commissioned and funded, leaving publication of conclusions at your discretion or an exercise in the public domain, for which public funding and open partnerships may be sought.

How?

An evaluation should use both internally generated and external information. Much of this information is likely to exist already, from your own monitoring, in the records of public agencies or from previous evaluation studies. This could include one-off surveys or studies covering your working area undertaken by development agencies, CSOs or government, as well as trade data, census data and environmental monitoring collected through standing systems/platforms (including GFW). Fresh information can be collected by commissioning your own socio-economic and/or biophysical surveys constructed around your evaluation questions. These could utilise a wide range of tools and approaches (face-to-face enquiries, ICT tools, reference photographs and remote imagery, key informant interviews etc). Triangulating your own monitoring and assessment with information from other sources can confirm accuracy or highlight areas for further enquiry and analysis.

Interpretation and learning

Your analysis of the information you collect and collate will be framed by your evaluation questions and should enable you to answer them. In an open, participatory evaluation, conclusions may be contested but learning should be a shared process. Plan ahead for consultation and carefully manage expectations on conclusions. For an Implementing Entity running an evaluation in-house there should be a common perspective on interpretation of information. Nevertheless, it will be important to plan to engage with different functions and management levels to ensure consensus on conclusions and the resulting lessons that will inform future decisions on smallholder engagement.